



DASHA

by the same author

TOMORROW WILL COME

an autobiography

POLONIAE TESTAMENTUM

a poem

FROSSIA

a novel

OUT OF SEIR

a poem

DASHA



E. M. Almedingen

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To
MONICA NOEL-HILL
in friendship

chapter one

SUNRISE OVER THE NEVA

I

I OUGHT to be listening,' thought Dasha, 'all of it is for me—the people on the platform, the flowers, the speeches, and I have not heard a word. But it does not matter—' she reflected swiftly and happily. 'They want me to enjoy it all, and life is gorgeous today—just like that funny moment when a piece of wood became a flower, not a very good flower, a cross between a soup-ladle and a rose, Vera Efremovna said, but all the same, it stopped being a mere piece of wood. And it will come again, I know it will . . . That small bearded man on the dais, he looks as though all he had ever seen in life was a bunch of wilted violets . . . I feel I could get that into his face—if I could ever do a face . . . I shall . . . I shall . . . Oh dear, I ought to be listening—' and Dasha stared hard at the kitten.

The fussy white-coated ushers at the door could not have noticed him. He must have flashed in somehow, a lovely and rebellious streak of orange and grey, the plummy tail tinged with white. Now he was on the platform, orange-grey fur startling against the red cloth draperies on the huge long table. He pulled at a corner, an inkstand toppled over and runlets of violet ink streaked the red cloth. The speaker paused, laughter rippled up and down the crowded hall, and someone's thin tanned hands pounced on the kitten. He was gone, the ink mopped up, and Dasha was again conscious of sitting in the front row of a huge closely packed hall, and she realised that soon it would be her turn to climb those menacing red steps to the dais. 'Speak loudly. Be brief. Be enthusiastic,' had urged Vera Efremovna, 'don't talk about yourself. They don't want to hear details of your marvellous cure—they

know them. Just tell them that you are terribly glad to be able to walk. Say it in the way you once talked to me about your carving. That will please them and hold them. Don't stutter, or pull your hair down your forehead, and don't look as though you were afraid of all those grand people from Moscow. Gratitude,' had said Vera Efremovna, 'comes from charity, it should put all fear into exile, and you have so much to be grateful for.'

That sermon was neither written nor spoken: it was graven in Dasha's memory, but she wished that Vera Efremovna had not gone to Odessa. 'Surely, her mother might have waited just for another day . . . Operations can always be postponed,' she thought petulantly, then reproached herself for harshness, and stared at the dais banked by massed bastions of white and blue flowers. There, the small bearded man in wilted white was coming to the end of his speech. She could not understand all he was saying, but, as it had so often happened before, she thought that words had an importance divorced from their meaning. The man's slow chiselled phrases were somehow like birds' wings, prepared for a long and exciting journey.

He finished, and the thin girl next to Dasha rose to her feet. Dasha had noticed her before. She was dark, wore crumpled white clothes, and her manner suggested that the whole meeting was rather extravagant, not to say unnecessary. She had said to Dasha in a cold clipped voice: 'Won't you be glad to get away? I suppose you feel like a gaudily dressed monkey at a show. It is much too stifling and, surely, they need not have turned the place into a hothouse—I would not have come, but they had nobody else to send, and open-air schools had to be represented. It was such a rush! I am going to the Caucasus tomorrow,' and for a brief instant Dasha had imagined herself being pushed into a very small box, with the lid coming down. It soon wore off. The day was much too exciting to give room even to the smallest feather of annoyance.

Now the girl was moving to the dais, and Dasha's eyes fell on something scarlet close by the empty chair. Instantly she stooped, picked it up, and, staring at a pear-drop ear-ring, remembered that her new white linen coat had exceptionally big pockets.

From the dais the girl sketched a nonchalant bow towards Dasha and said 'Daria Petrovna,' and Dasha blushed, almost wishing she had left the car-ring on the floor. 'Daria Petrovna' . . . She had been Dasha, Dashutka, any other loosely coined diminutive all her days, and the sudden formal use of the patronymic enhanced the bitter-sweet sense of adventuring under strange roofs. Also it shamed her and, a hot hand clutching the trinket in her pocket, Dasha kept her eyes away from the dais.

The thin girl dealt with facts arranged as tidily as pencils in a box on some shop counter. Twelve years ago a Leningrad child came to a Crimean sanatorium. She came as a cripple, she had never used her limbs at all, and the new cure had achieved the apparently impossible. Here the speaker grew delicately lyrical: Daria Petrovna might have gone on enjoying the freedom of the gorgeous Crimean country, the oleander walks, the sea-beach where, on clear days, you could see the tumbled white garland of Odessa, yet she was going back to the North, ready to accept novel surroundings and possibly hard circumstances simply because of her resolve to justify all the care spent upon her.

The speech led to a fugue of clapping and ground to dust Dasha's shame about the trinket. She sat, her mouth curved to faint irony. The adventure of travel indeed beckoned to her, but she knew she was being sent back because all the sanatoria were sadly overcrowded. It was all a matter of orders and reports, typed on grey and white paper slips, their dryly worded contents leaving no room for an individual's acceptance or refusal. 'And most public speeches are the same,' thought Dasha. 'Pink and blue ribbons tied round empty boxes . . .'

The thin girl was back. Dasha whispered politely:

'Thank you. It was fine,' she paused. 'Why, you have lost an car-ring—'

'Have I?' rather indifferently the other touched her right lobe. 'How tiresome! I must have dropped it in the tram, hurrying here. Trams in this place,' she added accusingly, 'are even worse than in Moscow. I had to strap-hang all the way.'

Dasha whispered on:

'What a lovely colour! Do you think I might have the one you have got? Just as a keepsake—it has been such a marvellous day.'

The girl smiled remotely.

'What a child you are . . . I should have been aching with boredom . . . Well, one ear-ring is no use to me. You can have it with pleasure. I bought them in Italy. They are coral.'

Incoherently grateful, Dasha accepted the trinket, but it was her turn to speak, and her finger-tips went cold. Somehow she found herself on the dais, islanded by expectant silence. She struggled to remember Vera Efremovna's precepts, but they had vanished, and even her own tempestuously coloured imagination seemed to have fallen upon a parched field. She coughed, blushed, and stammered:

'Citizens, you want me to speak, and I have nothing to say. I am just a peasant's daughter. I came here as a cripple, and they have cured me, and now I can walk, and work, and live—' she smiled shyly, 'it is a great thing to be alive . . . I am glad and grateful,' she bowed awkwardly, almost in the old peasant fashion, and nearly tumbled off the red draped steps.

The photographers got busy, and took her standing by the dais—a small slight body in white from head to foot, flaming red hair brushed off the forehead and plaited round the head, hazel eyes big in astonishment, and the irregular mouth opened rather too widely. The photographers, their business done, muttered in a corner:

'She may be interesting in the medical and, possibly, sociological sense, but not much in her. Just a plain Northern type. What could anyone do with such eyes?'

'Well, someone said she is very clever at carving—'

'That can't be seen in her face.'

But Dasha had escaped them all. The tumult and the glory were over, even the massed islands of white flowers looked defeated by the heat, the people were beginning to search for cool drinks and ices, but Dasha had finished with faces and voices. The longing for a quiet corner was not a whim dictated by some wildly flounced

mood, but a sharp-edged necessity. Outside the great panelled doors a red-capped nurse tried to keep her back.

'What about some chestnut ices on the terrace? And why should you be running away? So many people want to speak to you.'

'They want their drinks,' retorted Dasha. 'No, I am tired . . . And I must hurry . . . I have a train to catch. Please, I am so tired,' and she ran down the wide corridor. All her meagre belongings were packed, but she must stay alone, she must open the old bast hamper and slip the precious ear-rings in between the coarse pink and white underwear bestowed on her by the sanatorium, and she must be quick in case someone were to notice her. 'That girl was right—it is like being a gaudily dressed monkey at a show,' she thought, her heart hammering at the least sound behind her, but she reached the room in safety, and closed the door as carefully as if the clumsy wooden knob were made of finest porcelain.

'Well,' she examined the bits of coral lying in her hot palm, 'she was a stranger, she had not talked very kindly at first, and she travels so much, she may soon go to Italy again and buy another pair. I have had sweets and flowers all day long, but that is the first bit of finery I have ever had.' She knelt and untied the shabby strap round the bast hamper.

2

The hamper looked shabby and soiled, and spoke of hardier, bleaker surroundings than those Dasha was about to leave. The bast hamper belonged to smoky peasant huts, to fourth-class railway carriages, and evil-smelling waiting-rooms where people huddled on stone-flagged floors because no benches were provided for them. The bast hamper came from a world which died when Dasha was small.

Many years ago it was almost new. She had no other luggage when she came to the Crimea, a thin, shy cripple, overwhelmed by the strange blinding scene of sunlight, oranges, green-lacquered foliage, huge pink and white blossoms, incredible cleanliness of big-

windowed, gaily coloured rooms, and busy, capable, white-coated people who took charge of her so deftly and completely that now Dasha found it difficult to imagine the earlier stages of her journey. Separate details were still housed in her memory, so many pieces of a huge jigsaw puzzle, nearly all of it painted dark green or drab brown. There was a small timbered house in Maly Prospect, Vassily Island, Leningrad, a dim and dirty room with a cot by the grimy window, a dull enough scene without—cobbled pavements pitted with shell-holes, muddy water, hurrying men and women, their faces tired and their clothing sadly tattered. There were odd, direly infrequent meals of dried fish, *wobla*, thin gruel, and stale rye rusks. There were blackbeetles and bugs. The window's perpetual griminess warred on light, and the dawn came in pale grey shadows, and darker, more sinister shadows claimed the room later in the day. Yet the remembered canvas was not wholly given to darkly coloured squalor. A strange and deep content used to be Dasha's when, helpless, often hungry and cold, she lay there and watched some street children dance round a lamp-post, and her small mind repeated the movement and stayed unhurt by her own inability to share in it. In the summer, the window stayed open, and the wind from the river stole into the room, and then she thought she heard someone singing. Sometimes the rain came and drenched the verminous counterpane, and Dasha raised her face to the rain and spoke to it. There were so many lonely days, and the summer rain proved a kindly companion.

The timbered house held other tenants. She still remembered an undertaker with eyes as soiled as his old coat, and one Olga Semenovna, fat and unkempt, who brought other women's children into the world and still mourned for her own sons fallen as far back as in 1914. There was also a wizened old professor with a passion for getting out of everybody's way. There were many others whom she could remember by a word overheard or a gesture watched from her cot. All those people had been. They were gone. But there had been someone else in Maly Prospect and, sitting on the uncarpeted floor of the small white room, Dasha tugged at the worn hamper

strap. Frossia would have said: 'Dasha, it was stupid of you . . . If you liked those ear-rings so much, you should have asked for them. She might easily have given them to you . . . Today is such a great day for you, full of fun and adventure, and why must you soil it? Dasha, you were not like that as a child, and you are not like that in your letters. All these many years, Dasha, I have lived in your letters,' and Frossia would have said, 'You don't speak your words, you incise them, you can make an ordinary teacup come to life in a phrase . . . Yet all of you was wooden when you stood on the platform. Yes, I know, you stood there, thinking of the trinkets in your pocket, and all virtue went from you. You see, Dasha, all untruth is crippling.'

'That is the worst of it,' thought Dasha, tugging at the strap so fiercely she nearly broke it. 'That is always the worst of it—you draw a crooked line and try to make yourself think it is straight, and it never is, and all inside you gets as bitter as brine. I could not help it. I wanted them—and she had been so brusque and unkind. But Frossia must never know—' almost Dasha vowed not to wear the ear-rings, and yet knew she would do so once she found herself away from the Crimea.

No, Frossia must never know. She had been there in Maly Prospect, often hungry, anxious, and moody, but always herself. She had taught Dasha, and listened to her, and understood what it meant to watch movement and to feel it repeated in one's mind, and never laughed when Dasha whispered: 'Frossia Pavlovna, the rain says it knew we would get a little bread today.' Frossia helped with the packing of the last hamper for the long journey to the South, and tried to prepare Dasha for the inevitable bewilderment born of the change.

The Crimea certainly meant bewilderment as well as oranges, sunlight, and milk. Strangers were preoccupied with her small and useless body, and for months neither rain nor moonlight spoke to her. She was hurled into a world where the warmly familiar things were so many pictures hung upside down. There followed long spells of lying still, straps here and there, queerly shaped lamps over

her pathetic naked flesh. 'How can a lamp be a medicine?' Dasha wondered in silence because those earnest, white-coated strangers saw nothing but wet drops in the rain, and one's closest, most beloved fancies had to be kept in a secret room.

Sometimes things hurt. Often they wearied her. But Frossia's love never wearied. It spanned the distance, it reached Dasha all the way from the North, it wrapped her up in its comfortable folds. Frossia kept saying in all her letters:

'Wait . . . Wait and believe, Dashenka. God means you to be well. You are so patient, your patience is like a summer bloom in the winter. It gladdens me to think of it. Wait . . . ' And Dasha waited until she came to learn the virtue in her waiting. Life became a thickly shaded avenue, an archway of light at the other end. She waited until the day when Vera Efremovna appeared, a cheerful, emphatic hunchback, with an autumn apple for a face and small brown eyes which missed nothing, condemned nothing, and were interested in all they saw. Vera Efremovna stood in the doorway, a pair of flat-heeled, red kid shoes in her hand. There were no introductions: the shoes served as a password.

It was a dull morning, the skies looked shorn of all bold blue adventure, but the shoes took the greyiness out of the room, and Dasha stared at them till Vera Efremovna said in a deep voice:

'Well, I hope you like them. They are for you.'

Dasha laughed,

'I have never seen you before, though you are no stranger—you look too friendly. Yet what a very odd present . . . I might keep them by my bed and look at them sometimes.' She added hurriedly: 'And I must thank you.'

'Keep them by your bed? You are going to wear them,' retorted Vera Efremovna, and Dasha shuddered, wishing herself back in the warm and dirty gloom of Maly Prospect.

'But I shall never walk,' she whispered, and hid her white face in the pillows. 'Shoes and crutches! The floor looks slippery. Can't you understand that I am afraid?'

'Never walk? What do you think I am here for?' She waited, red shoes still in her hands, but Dasha turned her face to the wall, and Vera Efremovna went on: 'When you go swimming in a lake, you don't get in, toe by toe—not even when you are learning. I know it will be a hard business. Well, a pancake is not made by looking at the flour. Listen, I have just come from Kharkov. I met someone there who made me wish to sing songs all day long. You know the Civil War was over years ago. There was a man in it, sucked into a hamlet somewhere near the Dnieper steppes, and nobody remembered him for years. He was deaf and blind, and had both feet cut off. Well, they discovered him and had him brought to Kharkov, and did what they could for him. He will never see or hear again, but he has learnt carpentry, and the most important thing is that he means to live. So do you. But I have talked enough.' Vera Efremovna got up, kindly comfortable, but as determined as a blade of tempered steel.

It proved the beginning of a nightmare. Even Frossia's letters, crowded with warmly phrased encouragement, now brought little more than shredded solace. Dasha was hurt, frightened and tired. There were mornings when the small room seemed a shoreless ocean, and the floor under her feet turned into angrily swollen water ready to engulf her. There were days of tears and hours of fury. Once she seized a penknife, slashed the red shoes to ribbons, and flung them in Vera Efremovna's face.

'Well, I reckon you could not help it.' The deep voice was so calm, she might have been asking if Dasha wanted another slice of lemon in her tea, and Dasha's anger must needs yield room to shame as searing as a burning candle pushed into one's hand.

The shoes were replaced. Week by week, month by month Vera Efremovna continued her work until Dasha learnt that the ground under her feet was not an enemy.

'It is your will. The doctors have finished their work and made a good job of it. The rest lies in your will. Come on, Dasha, to that chair, and back again.'

Vera Efremovna never petted or kissed Dasha, never held out

glittering promises of a pear, a piece of *halva*, or a stick of chocolate. She did her work as quietly as if she were sitting by the stove, knitting a stocking. Only towards the end she said: 'Well, I knew you would not fail me. You are too human, too greedy for life.'

She was in Odessa when strange disturbances began interfering with the day's routine. Wardens, doctors, nurses, even the matron vanished, and newcomers took their place. Armed sentries, sullen and taciturn, prowled all over the richly leafed grounds. Some of them came indoors. They lounged in lobbies and on staircases, glowered at the patients, swore unprintable oaths, and broke the rule against spitting. In the yellow-walled dining-room, over a sketchy meal of burnt chicken and half-cooked greens, a patient whispered sulkily: 'They might have left the cooks in peace, but, of course, life goes topsy-turvy in a purge,' and the fiery-winged bird of a word ran all over the place. In wards and in the garden stories were whispered in low-keyed voices, and they gained volume and colour with each new repetition, weaving a wildly tinted woof of venality, political taint, mismanagement of state funds, and worse. Nobody knew the reasons and everybody invented them. To Dasha the suddenly shadowed stage suggested a different background. A purge, she thought, was just a variant of the civil war. It meant disaster more than discomfort, violence from dim corners, and a host of other perils. She kept her fears to herself, but her mood went grey, and her will to use her limbs grew thinner and smaller. The armed sentries vanished, and the place was given its earlier tidiness, the new staff stayed on, and the day's routine fell into its accustomed folds. The purge had come and gone, but Vera Efremovna, returning from Odessa, had to compel Dasha back to the hard beginnings.

'I was frightened,' Dasha confessed. 'All those soldiers, and people talking so much, and Matrena Nikitishna said she had seen a body under the magnolia by the lake.'

'You had not enough to do,' said Vera Efremovna, and a few days later she took Dasha to the carpentry room. That morning, untutored and unaided, she carved a flower which looked a cross

between a soup-ladle and a rose. That hour was of pure minted gold, but her later efforts suffered from crudity, as she thought, though tutors lavished praise on them. Dasha turned to humbler things, and made small boxes and spoons, and for a reason she could not understand, her hours in the carpentry room never found their way into her letters to the North. To Frossia she might have explained both the hush and the wonder. Her other correspondent, as Dasha felt, might have condemned those hours for a sinfully barren pastime.

In the house in Maly Prospect there had glided a thin shadow of a peasant woman, her voice apologetic, her back bent, her eyes always tired, a woman who had had much grief and had never savoured its sweetness, who had never seen beauty in toil or loveliness in ordinary things, who had first feared the Tzar's police, then the Red Guards, and later the militiamen, who had also feared hunger and cold, and stayed indifferent to dirt and vermin. None the less, that plaintive shadow was a mother, the Maly Prospect mother. Once only in twelve years she travelled to the Crimea, and now Dasha could hardly remember the very outlines of her face. Now Anna Trofimovna lived at Kraspole, to the west of Leningrad, suffered from some mysterious heart complaint, and no longer worked at a factory: she had married again, and her new environment suggested something fantastic to Dasha.

In a cheap yellow bag lay a bulky wad of letters. Those letters were a chain bridging the Maly Prospect days with the Crimea, a chain of bright links which forged something like reassurance in her heart, and gave a comforting outline to the future she could not yet see where carved flowers resembling soup-ladles might, so she feared, be found wholly superfluous and condemned by strangers too busy or too casual to remark an urge she herself could understand but dimly.

For twelve years Frossia, always detained in the North by work and by slender means which forbade all distant travel, kept writing those letters. Dasha's years of waiting and struggle, her lessons, her leisure, her half-formed fancies about people and things, all those

absorbed Frossia. 'Igor and I went to the ballet to celebrate the victory of the red shoes,' she wrote. 'I know it is true, but I shan't believe it until I see you walk. Igor says it must be true because you never despaired even as a child. I knew there was movement in your will . . .' Dasha slept with that letter under her pillow. Every phrase brought her back to some intimate beloved corner of her early days even though she could not remember Igor Vladimirovich very clearly except that he looked rather thin and solemn, spoke slowly, and told stories which made people forget how hungry they were.

Now, with a few more moments to spare, Dasha rummaged in the yellow bag for the last two letters.

'I had hoped to have you here in Leningrad, but your mother is determined to see you at Kraspole almost at once. Of course, I shall meet you at the dear old Nicholas Station. I so hope you have not quite forgotten it all. You will remember I had to spend two years away, lecturing at that new college in Kalinin, and I loved being there, the work was so moving and fruitful, but it was a relief to come home. Leningrad is so much yours and mine. It has not really changed much. Even that terrible statue of Alexander III is still there in front of the station. Of course, some change is inevitable. We have got shops, the docks are busy, there are lots of new factories, and the place is almost as clean as it used to be. Rationing is over. It seems almost unnatural—after twenty years—to buy things without cards. The first time we could buy bread, Igor and I went together, and we felt we were committing a crime . . . Well, do you remember Praskovia, who studied mathematics at my first college in Kamenmostrovsky? She, once an illiterate peasant, is now a fully fledged professor, and is married to a surgeon she met at Kazan. Please, my own dear Dashenka, don't come back to Leningrad as a stranger—neither of us could bear it.'

Dasha folded the letter but would not put it away. She still remembered Leningrad—in her own fashion, a free, tumultuous pattern woven of wind, cloud, rain, grey-purple stone, running water, thin spires breaking the skyline across the Neva, shuttered

shops, charred ruins of houses, a horse falling in Maly Prospect, hungry tattered people ambling in the middle of the street, saucepans crammed with evil-smelling frozen potatoes, the rusty *plita* in the small communal kitchen of the timbered house . . . Many bleak details she knew she would find gone, but the wind and the water would be there, and they were so much the soul of the city.

'I thought you would like to know,' wrote Frossia in her last letter, 'that I went down to Kraspole yesterday. Your mother was out, and her husband works at the local Food Trust office, so I did not see either of them. The house looks too small and neat not to be liked, and the garden is all smothered in old lilac bushes. I believe you will love Kraspole: the sea is not very far, only about two versts or less, and you can smell it everywhere. There are not many streets, only one of them is really offensive, but once you have passed the park wall, you come to a gorgeous secluded lane, and in ten minutes you are in a wood—all pine and larch.' Dasha guessed that Frossia meant her to find a sanctuary in the close neighbourhood of the sea and in larch coppices.

Anna Trofimovna wrote seldom, and her last letter at once disturbed and gladdened Dasha:

'We have just received an important paper about your return. Such a big envelope with a violet seal on it. They say you are going to stop in Moscow for a day or two. You must visit Maria Karpovna by the Arbat.' Dasha had no knowledge of Maria Karpovna. 'We eat well and shall keep warm in the winter. Nil Ilyich has a boil at the back of his neck. He does not like noise. I hear that one can get French silk stockings in a shop in Arnautskaya in Odessa. Buy me some. Our friends are expecting you. We have a telephone in the house. Don't take an evening train from Leningrad—Nil Ilyich says the afternoon train is much more convenient because the dinner need not be kept hot. The apples are doing well. I wish you all the best. Your loving mama.'

'I hate Kraspole,' Dasha said to the bast hamper, 'and you have never been there. You would much rather go to Maly Prospect or else to Frossia. Nil Ilyich must be dreadful.' She clenched her small

brown hands, aware that the lonely lane, the larchwood, and even the nearness of the sea would not be quite enough. In Leningrad she would not tell stories or steal trinkets on an absurd impulse. In Leningrad, with Frossia, she knew she could say that a man's words were like birds' wings. At Kraspole they would laugh.

But she glanced again at the clumsily written and misspelt letter, and two words tugged at her heart, 'We eat well'—'*iedim khorosho*'. The words struck a chord, and she must listen and remember the pathetic outbursts of love from her mother, the darkness, cold and hunger they had shared, the carefully divided potato, the small heroic lies: 'I have eaten my herring. That one is all yours, my little soul, *dushenka*,' and Dasha knew she would go to Kraspole, and call words 'words', and remember that Nil Ilyich did not like noise '*iedim khorosho*'. The future slipped away from Dasha's thought: she was back in Maly Prospect, small and helpless, left in the dark—were there ever spare candles to burn?—but the window stayed open, soft rain came in, and she raised her face to the cold, abrupt kiss.

3

Kraspole had its rows of neatly timbered villas, sunk in tiny flower gardens, its amusement pavilions, all green and red paint and glass roofs, its streets, lined with old elms, its spacious park, and an avenue of shops stamped with an apologetic air as if conscious that crude commerce should never have invaded that kingdom of neatly planed timber, chiselled stone, leaf and flower. Kraspole had once been passionately imperial. It still had the palace, Rastrelli's child, its painted halls now divided between the Food Trust, State Registry, an offshot of the Leningrad University, and a students' hostel housed in the worst damaged wing. Kraspole had a cathedral, now a museum, though some other churches stood open and were hardly ever empty. The state had seen to a cinema, a big concert hall, two schools, a hospital, and an open-air amusement centre in the meadows beyond the park. The timbered villas were all

tenanted, and the authorities chose to ignore the illicit letting of rooms. Kraspole's life beat a rather monotonous rhythm in the villas, rose to a higher note in the old palace, and climbed crescendo on the outskirts, by the airplane factory and in the workers' settlements. Those were built of stone, painted rose, and looked cheerful enough on a sunny day. But the least rain gave them a mournful damp expression.

The villas were small. At Kraspole spaciousness was left to the palace. The villas used to house those who loved the intoxicating neighbourhood of an exalted stage, mostly civil servants' wives who, returning to St. Petersburg in the autumn, sprinkled their conversation with tinsel details of splendours witnessed at a distance.

'I had my arms full of lilac, and would you believe it, the Grand Duchess smiled!'

'Ah yes, that was the morning when we met Grand Duke Alexander riding down Dubovaya. I am not certain, but I think he recognized me—you know—through my uncle's wife . . .'

'No, we never went to St. Michael's. Surely, at Kraspole, the Cathedral is the only place if you want to see anyone. Why, I was once lucky enough to pick up Grand Duchess Marie's handkerchief. That could never have happened at St. Michael's where the milk-women go . . .'

Now those days were hardly ever discussed at Kraspole. Old Barina, in her tiny cottage at the northern end of Dubovaya Street, could well remember that glory, yet her own share in it had been far too unimportant for her memories to burn with much colour. Moreover, old Barina preferred caution in all her ways. Miss Thompson, in her own small refuge, might have offered far more detailed and accurate reminiscences. Kraspole thought that an English governess's life must have flown close enough to that river of splendour. But Miss Thompson's memories remained curiously unshared. Kraspole had wondered at first, and ended by remembering that 'Miss', after all, was born in a country where 'grass' was pronounced 'hay' and spelt 'straw', as was pointed out by a black-eyed teacher from the elementary school. Such a strange land, argued Kraspole, could

well breed qualities as incomprehensible as Miss Thompson's reticence.

The world of the wooden villas had enough leisure for gossip, harmless and otherwise, for tea-drinking and such trivial pastimes as patience games and fortune-telling at Christmas and other seasons. But the world of the villas was only a small and rather pathetic island in a sea of frenzied activity. There were factories on its southern outskirts, and an aerodrome just behind the park, and the streets were crowded with young, energetic people who worked even in their day-dreams. The main pulse of Kraspole beat from the marble heart of the old palace where some fourteen hundred men and women worked from nine in the morning till four in the afternoon. Kraspole offered them some amusements to fill their leisure. Frequent trains ran to Leningrad. The huge concert hall gave room to important lecturers as well as to musicians and singers. Sometimes, going back to No. 47, Dubovaya, Anna Trofimovna looked with something like nostalgia at the hurrying crowds of young, eager people. Some of them jostled her. None took much notice of her. The nostalgia was always brief-lived. Anna Trofimovna did not belong to them, and she had no wish to join their ranks. She had a genuine heart complaint. At the hospital they told her firmly but kindly that she must be careful because her heart was older than her years.

Anna Trofimovna went to the hospital to please Nil Ilyich. She had no desire to be told things about her heart. She knew it. Her heart was old when Dasha went to the Crimea. She wanted a rest then, longing for incredible days spent in a clean, comfortable bed, in a warm room, with someone to keep a samovar on the boil and give her endless glasses of tea, with pale moons of lemon floating on top. She knew it was all incredible, and she had no hopes for any ease. She went on working in various factories in Kursk, Rostov, and Kiev. Gradually, the disturbing tenor of earlier revolution days gave place to calmer social drifts. Money appeared once again, a pattern of something akin to stability came to be traced on the national canvas. Life continued changing year by year, but Anna

Trofimovna went on in her humble ways of a factory hand until she realised that there were shops where she might buy a gaily coloured scarf, a provocative blouse, a pair of attractive shoes. The clothes bought hurriedly and at random, she turned to a mirror. She was worn out and looked it, her skin was tired, but her mouth could curve into a smile, and her blue eyes had a new eagerness in them as though her purchases had included a lien on adventure as well as clothes. A little later she heard magical stories of life in Moscow, asked for a transfer, got it, and went.

It proved a complicated journey. She had to change trains twice, missed a connection, and spent a night at a mournful wayside station. The waiting-room reminded Anna Trofimovna of all the family funerals she had wept and sung at. The warm summer night made her choose the platform. In the doorway she collided with a plump, well-dressed man who carried an important looking portfolio. Anna Trofimovna remembered she was wearing her new salmon-pink blouse. She unbuttoned her coat and smiled. The plump man stared at her. Under the timid oil lamp she saw his pink face frown, and her smile hurried away.

'I am in the Food Trust,' he spoke as if each word weighed about a *poud*, 'and you should not push important people, *grajdanka*.'

Anna Trofimovna sighed.

'You can't even say you had not noticed me. The lamp is here. And you stopped. You looked at me—'

'Of course I noticed you, and who would not, citizen?'

'My name,' he said severely, 'is Nil Ilyich Lukin.'

'It sounds nice,' she whispered, and knew he approved of her.

They went back to the waiting-room, and Anna Trofimovna schooled herself to forget about family funerals. There were no other passengers. Nil Ilyich said he never slept unless he could get into a bed, and the railways provided nothing but hard benches. Anna Trofimovna knew she was tired enough to sleep on a stone floor, but she did not say so. He wanted to talk, and she must listen.

'I work at the Food Trust office in Kraspole. I live in a small timbered house, No. 47, Dubovaya. It has five rooms, all of them

furnished, and there are decent lace and satin curtains to every window. I have the best primus stove in Kraspole. It came from Germany. I work very hard. I come home, eat my dinner, and drink tea in the evenings—all alone. There is the cinema and other amusements, but, *grajdanka*, I want you to understand that I am an exceptional man because I have so much to say. I like being listened to, and I am lonely. At Kraspole most people are too young, impolite, and always in a hurry. They shout that they have no time to listen. Then there are old people, but they seem to have lost all concern for really interesting things. A few weeks ago I said to one of them "carrots should be washed in tepid water—you scrape them much more easily that way". You will agree that was an interesting fact, I learnt it from a pamphlet on national cookery, and such pamphlets don't publish inaccuracies, and all the woman said was "Is that so?" and went off. It is all rather sad.'

Anna Trofimovna battled with her drowsiness, agreed with him, and went on listening. Their train came in the grey and wet dawn. Nil Ilyich got her a seat, some coffee, and thick sausage sandwiches. She drank three cups of coffee which she detested. But she felt warm and happy. On the way to Moscow Nil Ilyich asked her several questions, and she told her story as briefly as she could, fatigue rather than reluctance hampering her speech. In Moscow he took her to an office of *Zags*, the State Registry. They were married and went on to Kraspole and to the house with five richly furnished rooms, decent curtains to every window, and Anna Trofimovna was enchanted with No. 47. It had a balcony and an attic as well as the five rooms, and it stood almost sunk in a lake of old lilac. Inside it was all old mahogany, green satin curtains, pink taffeta cushions, and rather worn Turkey carpets. In the dining-room the long table was shrouded in red plush, and untrammelled movement was difficult because of the whatnots crowded with multi-coloured china knick-knacks. Anna Trofimovna wept in rapture and gratitude. The dark, hungry, dirty and tormented years were as though they had never been.

Nil Ilyich bustled in and out of the five rooms, fat, pink, shining,

always certain of the sun over his head, and Anna Trofimovna came to love him out of gratitude for the comfort and indulgence he had given to the first good listener he ever met.

He worked in a department which dealt with tinned foods. Varied samples often cluttered his office, and the cleaner said: 'Have pity on me, Citizen Lukin, how can I dust and sweep with so much lumber about?' and Nil Ilyich frowned, talked of a possible emergency, and dictated terse letters to Moscow about vitamins and calories in peas, pork, and plums. But he always considered those who worked for him. The floor must be swept, there were no cupboards in the office to give even temporary refuge to the rows of gaily labelled tins, and Nil Ilyich must needs carry them home. The tins could not be paid for. Strictly speaking, they had no market existence, but they must be removed so that the cleaner might sweep the floor, and Anna Trofimovna must give up all legitimate marketing, and struggle with several tin openers. The tins baffled her, and she served peculiar meals, mixing pineapple with spinach, or pork with plums, and she suffered from indigestion, but Nil Ilyich thought of the mollified office cleaner, and stayed content. He never asked Anna Trofimovna whether she preferred fresh carrots to tinned beetroot. She learned soon enough that he disliked asking unnecessary questions.

'It is much kinder to people if you order them about. It saves them the trouble of making up their own minds—such a wearisome business,' and Nil Ilyich read his paper approvingly. 'Now Hitler and Mussolini must be truly exceptional people. I could get on with them. Everybody toeing the line—just as it should be. There is my silly typist, Tatiana Markovna, she will use black carbon for my duplicates, and how many times have I not told her that all duplicates must be done in purple. Black carbon indeed . . . It disturbs routine.'

'Yes, Nil Ilyich, it does—'

Within a year Anna Trofimovna became a perfect echo. She enjoyed her life. All the several comforts had to be paid for by constant and ready acquiescence, and she never resented the payment.

Nil Ilyich knew of Dasha. Her story, heard for the first time, gave him an opportunity for a heroically scaled monologue about the munificence of the state. Certain sonorous phrases were constantly repeated whenever his kin-minded acquaintance came to No. 47 to drink tea. Otherwise he never referred to Dasha. The Crimea lay comfortably distant from Kraspole.

Anna Trofimovna was alone when the letter came. The huge violet seal frightened her, and it was some time before she steeled herself to open the envelope. The formal wording puzzled her, and she read it twice over, and then all suddenly, her tired blue eyes welled with tears and she pushed away a half-eaten saffron bun.

'My Dashenka . . . So it is a fact. They have cured her . . . And she is coming back. My own little one—'

No. 47 had one free bedroom at the back, neatly furnished with mahogany in the severe and lovely style of Paul I's day, all undoubtedly purloined from the palace in the remote chaotic days. The small square window was curtained in thick green satin embroidered with tiny silver bees. Anna Trofimovna went into the room, stroked the green brocade counterpane, tugged at the curtains, and cried for pleasure.

In the afternoon, Nil Ilyich came back. They dined off properly chilled cucumber soup, mutton *shashlyk* with rice, and strawberry jam tart. He finished and wiped his mouth.

'Tatiana Markovna upset a large bottle of green ink. It ran all over the floor. I did tell her to have the bottle put away. A large ink bottle is not safe on a table. But she is too silly to listen.'

'Yes, Nil Ilyich,' and she gave him the letter from the Health Commissariat.

'Well,' he said slowly, 'that is a surprise—but, of course, we must do our duty.'

'Dasha will have the small room at the back. Those curtains are so lovely . . .'

'Who said so?'

'Why, that is the only room, Nil Ilyich—'

'Who said Dasha was to have it?'

'Well, of course—I mean . . .'

'In this house it is for me to make arrangements—'

'She is my child,' Anna Trofimovna said sullenly.

'You have not seen her for more than ten years. Of course, she must come here, you are her mother, but we must be reasonable. We know nothing of her. She has had quite exceptional advantages—but we know nothing of her. She may be untidy, she may be a loafer, she may even be a thief. The letter explains nothing. She was cured some years ago, and they kept her on. She may have done something—'

'Nil Ilyich, the letter says all sanatoria are overcrowded—'

'I know much more than you do about official language. That is just one of the usual excuses. Of course, she comes here . . . but that room has valuable furniture. She can go into the attic. And when she is here, she must do as she is told.'

'That is old régime, Nil Ilyich. You can't interfere with her, she is over twenty, and how could you say that she, my own flesh and blood, may be a thief? Shame, Nil Ilyich, with all your education to be saying such uncultured things—'

He got up, wiped his hand on a towel, and slapped her face.

'Now say "that is not allowed, no citizen has the right to manhandle his wife." Yes, you are free to go and fetch a militiaman, and have me arrested, but you must remember that nothing shall be done in this house without my consent. It disturbs the routine.'

Anna Trofimovna wept loudly.

'Dasha will probably have that back room, but we must wait. You need not go to Leningrad to meet her. There is a very good train in the afternoon,' he picked up the letter. 'Goodness, here is a spelling mistake. They are careless . . . Well, write to Dasha and tell her not to take an evening train—'

'Yes, Nil Ilyich.'

He went out of the room. Anna Trofimovna seized the towel and rubbed her wet and burning cheeks. All the earlier joy had gone out of her, and she almost wished Dasha were not coming.

'Nil Ilyich has never struck me before . . . So unlike him . . .

But how could I bear him calling her a thief? Oh Mother of heaven, what a calamity! Everything is certain to be upset. She is young, and young people do such odd things nowadays . . .' She heard the door open, raised her head, and the tears, still streaking her flushed cheeks, seemed her only clothing. Nil Ilyich smiled and held out a brown paper parcel.

'Ania, I was too hasty . . . Now I forgot your Easter egg this year. Here it is. Have it made up properly, please, a wide skirt, sleeves to the elbow, and a becoming neckline—'

'Nil Ilyich,' Anna Trofimovna gasped at the tumbling folds of violet *crêpe de chine*. 'Why, I must go and see old Barina at once. It is lovely,' a spate of incoherent thanks broke from her, and Nil Ilyich looked pleased in his usual glossy way.

'Yes, I know it is good. It is French. Remember what I said—sleeves to the elbow—it is a summer dress.'

They kissed. Anna Trofimovna's cheeks were dry. She tidied the table, straightened the red plush shroud, wrapped up the silk, and almost ran out of the house.

'Yes, yes, sleeves to the elbow, and a becoming neckline,' she muttered, hurrying down the wide Dubovaya Street.

4

Presumably, old Barina possessed a Christian name, a patronymic, and a surname, all written down in some State register and repeated in her own passport, but at Kraspole she was old Barina to the whole world, including militiamen. The obsolete way of address could no longer evoke counter-revolutionary spectres. Moreover, old Barina was far too unimportant a social speck, a small, ironed out, shuffling thing with her dusty black skirts and a shabby, beautifully cut purple jacket, still burdened with tarnished silver braid. Old Barina shuffled because she wore cloth shoes, leather hurt her feet, she said, and she always hurried because

she disliked being in the streets longer than her simple business warranted.

She had not always belonged to Kraspole. She was washed up there by the tide of disordered years, and she stayed on because she had nowhere else to go. She belonged to modestly moneyed gentry, though nobody knew much of her beginnings. She may have had a husband, or a lover, or children. She may have experienced the excitement of passion, intrigue, adventure, or travel. She hardly ever talked about the sealed rooms in her earlier life, and such memories as she sometimes shared with her very few intimates, were blurred, knotted-up things.

The chaotic and terrible years had left her at least one legacy. She had never been able to mislay her fears: fears of darkness, cold, hunger, steps of someone unseen behind a corner. She hoarded food, fuel, soap. She would light the oil lamps almost before twilight, and she never went out in the evening except to pay a call at No. 47 which lay at no great distance from her own cottage. At sunset, her small shrunken home stood curtained and shuttered, and the green-painted door was locked and bolted. Old Barina was afraid of distances, long roads, unfamiliar faces, and all big things from a house to a dog. Small things comforted her. She loved holding a tiny ornament cupped in her thin blue-veined hands. 'There is friendliness in such small things,' she used to say.

Kraspole gave her quiet refuge and an occupation. The small old hands were well-versed in at least one craft: the needle was a harp-string to old Barina. She sewed, darned, mended, embroidered, and felt as happy as a child with a brightly coloured ball. Typists and other young women used her gladly. Old Barina had a way with the material, an eye for line and colour, and an unending stream of ideas. She charged little enough, but she had a small pension, and kept a houseworker, Valia, a lurchback from Petrosavodsk in the North. Kraspole looked upon Valia as a thin pale reed of inarticulate gratitude; it was rumoured that Valia would thank a lady-bird for alighting on her hand when she weeded old Barina's tiny garden. She would get out of a worm's path, and when people ate

oranges, she could stay satisfied with the rind. Old Barina forgot the pay day, and Valia forgot to remind her. Old Barina occasionally received a visit from some kin-minded, frail flotsam in Lenin-grad; Valia gave up her bedroom and slept on the kitchen floor. Old Barina loved to eat mushrooms gathered at dawn, and Valia indulged her though it was not good for her to get her legs soaked to the knee. Old Barina liked quiet and long prayers. Valia schooled herself to forget that she had a fine voice, and joined in the prayers which said very little to her.

Sometimes old Barina said:

'Get some herrings and a pound of raspberry jam. I have a cold coming. I must have raspberry jam in my tea. Don't hurry home—it is raining so hard—you might stumble and break the jar.'

'I could always buy another, Barina.'

'You must not treat food so lightly,' old Barina crossed herself in horror.

Valia had cousins in Petrosavodsk. They never came to Kraspole, but they remembered her, and parcels, sewn in rough canvas, came to the tiny cottage, and old Barina must always be present when they were opened.

'Why, what a lovely cardigan. Valia, is that from your cousin who works at Archangel? Why, it was made in Scotland. What heavenly wool! But you are much too young to wear mauve—'

'I could have it dyed,' said Valia in so strange and firm a voice that old Barina nearly pricked her finger with a needle.

'It might not look so nice then. It might even shrink or the colour run in the first wash,' she hesitated and chose to be obvious, 'and mauve has always suited me, Valia.'

It had so often happened before, and Valia would smile and say, 'Why, you are welcome to it, Barina,' but now her thin work-stained hands clung stubbornly to the cardigan, her chin jutted out, her hazel eyes became a stranger's eyes, so remotely and coldly they looked at Barina, though her mouth still curved in a smile, and she said softly enough:

'Well, no, you have two cardigans of your own, Barina—'

'Mauve would never suit you.'

Valia said nothing. She bent over the parcel and wrapped it up again.

'How can you be so unkind to me?'

But Valia had already vanished into the dim tiny kitchen to peel potatoes and shred some cabbage. They ate their dinner in awkward silence. In the evening old Barina whimpered over her tea, but Valia remained distant, the mauve cardigan had vanished, and for some days an uncomfortably thick curtain hung between the two women. Valia no longer looked a stranger, her eyes were once again warm and soft, but old Barina felt disturbed as if, for a few moments, she had seen an old and familiar picture hanging upside down.

There was plenty to eat at Kraspolc, but old Barina was always hungry. A week later another parcel came from the North. Valia was out, and old Barina ripped open the thick grey canvas. Her small brown eyes brooded over home-made jam, mint gingerbread, boiled sweets, and a fat liver sausage in pink paper.

'God has mercy on all poor and hungry folk,' she crossed herself.

She opened the jam, broke the gingerbread into clumsy pieces, and hacked at the sausage with a blunt knife. She ate until all strength failed her, and her jaws refused to serve her frenzied will any longer. She pushed away the half-emptied box of sweets, felt light-headed, slightly sick, and unaccountably happy. Valia came back. Old Barina giggled.

'That was your parcel, *milochka*. I can't eat any more . . . I am sorry—but you should not have crossed me that day. Mauve would never suit you . . . Well, I knew you would be glad of the liver sausage, you can never get that kind at Kraspole . . . There is none left,' she hiccuped and was sick.

Valia said nothing. She fetched some water, tidied the room, arranged the cushions on the shabby, lumpy sofa. The old woman watched her behind half-closed lids.

'Valia, God forgive me, a greedy old hag that I am . . . But you won't leave me . . . You are not angry?'

'It is nothing, Barina . . . But you should not have made yourself so ill. Here, lie still, I will fetch your sewing.'

And old Barina felt happy again, the needle in her fingers, and worked on till Anna Trofimovna appeared, flushed, excited, important. The violet *crêpe-de-chine* was flung on the sofa, instructions were showered on old Barina, and then Anna Trofimovna remembered:

'Goodness, Dasha is coming. You know they cured her some years ago. Fancy, Barina, I have never seen her walk . . . They are giving her some clothes, she says, and a little money. She is quite well-educated, and they tell me she is clever at carving things, but that is not a proper way to work, is it? She may get a clerk's job. I am afraid Nil Ilyich is vexed,' she paused, 'in a manner of speaking, Barina, she is a stranger. She never wrote often . . . All the same, an apple off one's own tree is not a borrowed pear.'

'Anna Trofimovna, you must give a real party.'

'I might, but there is Nil Ilyich. He does not often like them. The last time we had one, people just did as they pleased, and nobody listened to him. You see, Barina, he is such an exceptional man, and not everybody understands that . . .'

'Well, but Dasha's coming is something exceptional too. And she might bring her own friends. They would be different from the folk at Kraspole.'

'Dasha has no friends. There may be some in the Crimca, and there is a woman in Leningrad . . . I just remember her. She had a room in the house in Maly Prospect. A proper old *régime* lady she was, very kind, but so queer. She once had a madwoman share her room. And she married a railway worker, yes, Barina, a real *prostoy*, as they used to say in the old days. She teaches, I think.'

'Well, Dasha might teach, or else go into a factory.'

'They say she is not strong enough. You know, Barina, it is a funny thing—they took her away, and they kept her there, and the first time I went to see her, all the nurses and people behaved as if I did not know what to do with my own child. And now they are sending her back. It is a worrying business. Nil Ilyich is an impor-

tant man, he works so hard, he must have quiet of an evening, and what will Dasha do in the evenings?' asked Dasha's mother. 'She may want the wireless on, and Nil Ilyich likes nothing except the news. Or else she may buy a gramophone of her own . . . Imagine the noise—'

'Well,' said Barina, threading a needle, 'if you are afraid of water you will never cross a river. Dasha will work. They are all working nowadays. Nobody dare be idle. It is just as well—doing nothing sours you too much. It is a great thing to have a daughter come back—' she picked up her scissors rather abruptly, but Anna Trofimovna was too preoccupied to observe the hint, and old Barina added almost peevishly: 'the evening is not very young, *dorogaya moya*, and I must finish this nightgown. It is for Nil Ilyich's typist, that funny Tatiana Markovna,' she explained, holding up a length of pale green muslin. 'Always after finery she is, and her head like an empty chocolate box.'

'She will spill ink,' Anna Trofimovna said absently and went.

5

'Bow for us to old Moscow—'

'Don't eat too many *kalachi*—'

'And send us postcards—'

'And go to look at that new underground railway—'

'She can't. It is not finished yet—'

'Bow to Moscow, the *bielokamennaya*—'

The small platform teemed with the nurses Dasha had known for years, yet now their familiar faces were seen through a veil and their shrill, cheerful voices came to her from another world. They brought her a huge sheaf of red flowers and a blue box of apricot paste, and she smiled her shy thanks, but she knew the waiting was over, a new day had broken for her, and she wanted the third bell to clang and the express to steam out of the oleander-ringed station.

Her new day had indeed broken. It had a multi-coloured, ever-shifting pattern, and Dasha soon discovered that hardly any room was left for abstract reflections. All along the way to the capital people got in and out, with their bulgily strapped bedding, their tin kettles, their bundles of chicken, rye bread, hard-boiled eggs and pickled cucumbers. There was little room and less air, some of them must sit on their tumbled bedding in the narrow corridor. They grumbled at the flies, the hot sun, their neighbours' boots, and the occasional rudeness of the train guard. They laughed and sang when the wind and the rain cooled the carriage, or someone's tin kettle got upset, or a woman, sprinkling sugar instead of salt over her rye bread, decided to look upon it as gingerbread, and ate it, singing about Tula.

They ate, slept, ate again, talked about the world, the crops, their own lives, the ever-growing wonders in cities and the country. They read 'Pravda' and 'Red Star', and proudly told their neighbour about achievements in their own families. A bulky Volga fisherman, his skin the colour of oak bark, had a son who was chemical engineer in the Urals, and a thin little woman from some obscure Chernigov village was going to Moscow to stay with her daughter, a surgeon at an important hospital.

'Engineering is more worthwhile than medicine,' scoffed the fisherman.

'Is it now?' the little woman looked like an angry hawk, 'and what would you do if your inside went wrong?'

'Die,' he retorted. 'I would not have any of them mess me up. A man's body is not an animal's carcass—I reckon it is unnatural to go hacking it with a knife. And,' he added, smirking at everybody in the carriage, 'I have never been on my back in my life.'

She spat angrily. He flung a brief ugly oath at her. She licked her thin pale lips, and capped it with an expletive so choice that the fisherman leant back, his mouth gaping. Sharp-edged inelegant abuse continued for some ten minutes, then he grinned, rummaged in a bundle tied into a blue handkerchief, and held out a chicken leg.

'What a *baba*,' he said admiringly. 'At Vidova they would chair you for such language.'

She looked modestly pleased, gnawed at her chicken, and invited him to share her *vatrushki*.

Travelling knit them all together as though they still remembered their forefathers' pilgrim days when they marched from north to south and north to west, and back again, small wicker *sumki* across their shoulders, bast sandals on their bare feet, and on such journeys strangers met as brothers, stale rye bread, pickled cucumbers, and even casually given alms becoming common property. Now they went in trains, could use their wireless sets, had votes, and were able to read books and papers, yet the older, less rangible things had struck deep roots, and could not vanish altogether in spite of changed horizons and widened circumstance.

'People are boxes,' thought Dasha, 'and most of them keep their lids on. I did think those two would fight.' She watched a fat woman, her face the colour of overboiled beetroot—all the more striking because of the crimson blouse and a gaily flowered print apron. 'She is eating her fourth cabbage pasty. She has been chewing for hours. She should be an ordinary box—but is she just cabbage pasties and jam puffs and nothing more?'

Moscow left her speechless. She remembered a city pattern in the dim Maly Prospect days. The sanatorium lay at some distance from a town, and the measured rhythm of urban life, glimpsed at infrequent intervals, had never before caught at her. In Moscow, the shops, traffic, loud speakers at street corners, colour and sunshine, flower-stalls, the green trunk-shaped carts of ice-cream men, the smell of fried onions and roast mutton from the open-air snack bars, *objorochki*, processions with flags, garlanded banners and drums, each and all made her wonder if she had ever been alive before. The women in Moscow suggested breathless, multi-coloured cinema reels. They did not just live in the city, they *were* the city. They marched in processions, they made public speeches, they mended telephone wires and serviced the street radio sets, they manned government offices, and ran hospitals, and drove trams.

Some looked drab, tired, and almost ironed out. Others were smart, cleverly painted, as taut as violin strings. But even the tired ones suggested a certain curiosity alive in them as though they were saying to themselves, 'Well, this life is wearying, strange, and exacting—but we must get to the next corner and see what is going on there . . . It might be the last corner we shall ever see, and it is worth trying to get to it.'

Watching that breathless pageant, Dasha was almost frightened. What note could she strike in that orchestra? She could never drive a tram, or sweep a street, or mend a telephone wire. She had her interview with kindly, efficient but abrupt women at the Health Commissariat. To them she was a case, and they gave her formal enough attention, explaining that she might teach or learn a handicraft, and be trained at some technicum in Leningrad.

'Must I decide now?'

'Well, no, you need not. You can always write to us, and we would arrange it.'

Dasha thanked them and went.

Outside the room, on a startling white wall she saw a slogan painted in scarlet and black: 'He who does not work shall not eat,' and she blushed fiercely and wished she might run back and say to the efficient formal woman: 'Well, I have had some lessons at carving. Once I made a rose out of wood, and I felt very happy, but is it work when you think there is wine in you instead of blood? I love Moscow, but these days have made me feel useless and rather small . . .' but she checked the futile impulse, returned to the hostel, collected her luggage, and made for the October Station and her Leningrad train.

She had forgotten all about time, and got there so early that a fat and fatherly porter shepherded her to the buffet. 'Sit here,' he said gruffly, 'and drink some tea. There is more than an hour, *milochka*, and the platform is like a beehive—they would sweep you off, you are so small.'

She was glad of hot tea, and sat quietly, her eyes occasionally straying to her luggage. A woman in the train had talked rather

too much of looting and pilfering. 'They steal even in broad daylight, anti-Christ's . . . Why, I had a basket of fish snatched out of my hands in Kiev. The militiaman was kind enough, but the fish had gone.'

Yet here, in the well-lit, crowded room, nobody seemed to covet the yellow canvas case and the bast hamper. Dasha asked for more tea and stared at a woman at the next table. The woman had a thin, cleverly painted face and enormous brooding black eyes. She wore expensive immaculate white, black gloves to the elbow, and an absurd black hat with a tapering white feather. She answered Dasha's stare rather contemptuously, turned to the fat important man by her side, and said in a loud brittle voice:

'Kolenka, I must have some more wine. I have not had enough. You are mean. You don't understand subtle psychology—'

The room heard her. Some smiled. Others shrugged. The fat man lit a gold-tipped cigarette.

'You heard what I said? Is that a way to treat a lady? Another bottle of Crimean white wine and a lemon ice—at once . . . I insist . . . That is final.'

The fat man said, the cigarette hanging loosely from his pink lips: 'The train will be here in ten minutes. We must go, Irochka.'

'Kolenka, you scoundrel, I shall never kiss you again. I insist on the wine. I absolutely insist.'

The man shook his head, and she got up so quickly that her huge white bag swept some plates off the table. She tore off her black hat, trampled it under her feet, and screamed. The fat man sighed, shrugged, and moved away when one black-gloved hand shot out and hit him across the face. Waiters ran to pick up the broken crockery. Two militiamen appeared from nowhere. The woman still insisting on wine and lemon ices, was led away. Dasha felt faintly sick and closed her eyes.

'Drink up your tea,' said a deep voice.

She looked up to see a shabby bearded young man sprawling in the opposite chair. His grey coat had no buttons, his white shirt looked frayed and soiled, but the rugged kindness of his ugly

tanned face, all mouth and beard and cheekbones, made her smile.

'Don't make faces. Drink up your tea.'

Dasha drained her glass and said: 'She was a funny box—'

'She—a box? A garbage bin rather! But what a way to describe anyone! And she was not funny . . . Just a slime-bred parasite. All street prostitution is gone, but we have started expensive shops, and there is wide inequality of piece-work wages, and what not besides, and such fungi must needs sprout, blast them to a hell nobody believes in . . . You need not look so white. Have you never seen a tart make a fool of herself? I say—what is the matter with you?'

'It was the way she screamed. I thought she had gone mad.'

'Just drunk,' he dismissed the incident with a shrug. 'Well, so people are boxes. And here is another box for you. Shall I raise the lid? Kirill Markovich Ivanov, lecturer in history and literature at the State Leningrad University, Kraspole branch.'

'Kraspole again—'

'What do you mean again? And you were badly brought up. You should have introduced yourself.'

'Dasha,' she blushed and stammered. 'I mean Daria Petrovna Utina. I am on my way to Kraspole. I come from the Crimea.'

'I have heard the name,' he broke in, ruffling his thick chestnut hair, 'why, there was an article about you. They cured you, didn't they? So you are the miracle—and a very funny one—talking of people as boxes and getting scared by common tarts. You must meet Gleb. You and he are fruit off the same tree.'

'Who is Gleb?'

'Never mind. Wait. He will be at Kraspole. Don't frown. Why do you hate the place?'

'I'd much rather go to Leningrad.'

'Forty minutes' journey. And Kraspole is not all Dubovaya Street.'

'What is Dubovaya then?'

'A piece of ornamental water, completely stagnant, and richly covered with dead leaves. But the houses are quite comfortable—'

so I hear. People like us don't often go there, we are all too busy.'

'My mother lives there,' Dasha said in a small cold voice, and wished he would go so that she might be free to find a quiet dim corner somewhere and cry. Dubovaya, a piece of ornamental water, and she was going there. She hated the young man in his buttonless coat, and yet was drawn to him, and she must open her bag and read a few phrases out of her mother's last letter.

'Now you see—what am I to do there?'

'Live,' his abruptness no longer astonished her, 'and work. Heavens, must you forget you are a miracle? Miracles can go on flourishing among nettles, and Dubovaya is not that. Just dead leaves . . . Well, well, stepfathers matter less than a headless herring,' and he glanced at the pink-faced clock above their heads. 'Paid for your tea? Good. I had better go and get you a seat.'

But Dasha said: 'No, thank you. My Uncle Fedia is coming.'

He shrugged. 'I shall see you at Kraspole then,' and he vanished through the huge swing doors.

'Oh dear,' Dasha murmured to the bast hamper at her feet. 'Why did I invent that uncle? Vera Efremovna used to say "Lying is such poor stuff. It lands you in a room with no windows in it . . ." and I understand that. But it just happens as if another's tongue were between your lips.'

Here the fatherly porter came and led her away, the bast hamper swung across his massive shoulder.

6

'Frossia Pavlovna! No, no, just Frossia, Frossia. . . '

She was not really grown up. She had never spent those years in the Crimea, never been photographed by press reporters, or made speeches in public. She was merely a small Dasha, a cripple, lying in a narrow, dirty cot in a dim room and, because she was a cripple, she could not move. There was no need to move, to do anything, even to say much. There, on the crowded, sunlit platform of

Nicholas Station, the shabby luggage at her feet, Dasha cried noisily and happily, fumbled for her handkerchief, and cried again because at last she understood that in certain moments she could live and be in love with life, because there had always been Frossia in her wide and generous letters; and now here was Frossia before her, Frossia who understood unshapen thought and unspoken word, who could talk about cats and tulips and foreign countries and people, and had a warm secret living in her, and its warmth somehow touched you and made you feel life was good when all things in it looked stupid, stained, and useless. Frossia who got angry and impatient, and never apologized, but who understood everything because nothing was locked in her, who was as open as a sun-flower in mid-July. She looked as thin and as beautiful as in those remote and unhappy days, thought Dasha, 'just a few silver streaks in her hair, and a few lines about her eyes—but they are the same eyes, and her hair lies like a casque, all brown-golden. . . .' Dasha cried again and gulped, pointing to the yellow canvas case:

'All your letters are here,' and faltered because she had to say so much, and words were running away from her. Everything seemed tumbled together in her mind, all crimson-lit, comforting, and incredible.

'My golden one, *zolataya moya*, why, you are a woman. I had been expecting my little Dashenka. And not even a crutch. . . . They have done it. Walk, Dasha, walk—I must see you walk.'

People jostled and crowded up and down the platform. A white-aproned porter stood and grinned at them. A burly milkwoman, a huge can in her arms, tugged at her red shawl and wiped her eyes. A curly-headed schoolboy stared, blushed, and turned away. People went hurrying by, but they smiled at the small crying girl in white, flaming hair tumbled all over her forehead, and they smiled at the tall woman in green who looked as if she were seeing heavens open before her.

'Walk, Dashenka, walk—'

Dasha went to the coach and back again, and saw Frossia's mouth shake, and checked her own tears, and remembered that it

was morning, that she was in Leningrad, with Frossia, and her stained face shone.

'It is a truly holy day to me. I have prayed so hard, and so has Igor, and we had never imagined it could happen. Dashenka, do you remember your mother refusing those canvas shoes for you just before you went away? She said you would never walk, shoes were useless, and they gave her two gingham dresses instead.'

'Yes . . . And do you remember me asking what an orange was, and someone answering "a bit of sunshine to hold in your hand and then to eat . . ." and I remember staring at the sun when I was in the train and wondering if it would really drop down on the earth by the time I was in the Crimea. It seemed so far away. I remember asking someone when they lifted me off the train, "Has the sun come down? I want to eat a piece of it, please," and they looked at me gravely—they must have thought me mad as well as crippled.'

Now they were going down the station steps, but almost every second Frossia must stop and look at Dasha's canvas-shod feet, and Dasha hurried her on:

'I am real, Frossia. But everything else is incredible. It is such a hot bright morning, but I know once the day is dead, something of the morning will still be there . . . I am eating the sun now, Frossia, chunks and chunks of it—'

They came out. Dasha stood still, her voice sunk to a whisper so low that even Frossia could not hear it. There was the generous sweep of the square, the age-tarnished domes of Znamevsky church, the grey-red massif of the old Northern hotel, the lumpy mass of Alexander III's equestrian statue.

'He is still there—looking as if his dinner disagreed with him!'

'I did tell you,' Frossia reproached her, but they sat in the rickety droshky, clenching each other's hands, and Dasha accepted the reproach with a smile. 'Dashenka, I know you want to look everywhere, but, please, listen for a few seconds. Igor had to go to Moscow a few days ago, to see his oculist—his eyes have been rather troubling him, but he knows he will see you soon. He has lived in your letters as much as I have. Now your mother telephoned early

this morning. She wanted you to go to Kraspolc today, but I said you would be tired. You are staying with me, Dasha,' cried Frossia, 'I know you are a miracle, and I have seen you walk—but can you ever listen?'

The droshky was ambling past Kazan Square. Dasha squeezed Frossia's hand and cried:

'The pigeons . . . The pigeons . . . And the Admiralty spire ahead, and that dark tumble must be Alexander Gardens. Frossia, was there ever a city more beautiful? And the river must be just there. Frossia, we must go and see Vassily Island and Maly Prospect,' she pleaded, a child in her pleasure. 'Today, yes, at once. It might not be the same in the afternoon. I might change or something. Just now there is loveliness over everything—and some newness, and we must go.'

'We shall go,' sighed Frossia. 'We shall do every mad and foolish thing that pleases you. We shall tramp all over the Island, and watch the birds circle over the old lighthouse by the Exchange Bridge, and wander up and down Petersburg Side, if you like. I promise you that. But first we are going to be prosaic and sensible. There are still such things as armchairs and meals in the world, Dashenka. Anyway, it is such a joy that you have not forgotten anything.'

'How could I?' Dasha's eyes shone over the newly remembered landmarks, known and loved in the terrible days of being pushed about in a rough wooden sled. Even the smells of the city came back to her: the smell of water and salt, and freshly tarred streets, and the tang in the wind, and the scent of freshly roasted sunflower seeds from the tiny stalls by the old Gostiny Dvor. The wheels, crunching on the pavement, told a story she had heard too many times ever to forget. The pigeons, whirling and spiralling above the scarred roofs of many a house, were so many winged refrains of the same song that the rain had once murmured in her ears. Every stone in the city was saying to her: 'You are back. I once cradled you when you were tiny and helpless. I have gifts for you now that you can walk in freedom. Come to me, listen to me,

learn of me. I still carry a few of the old scars, sometimes I look weary, and many of my children will never feel unwearied again. But I can still teach strength and still dispense beauty, I can still remind people of pride which has nothing to do with race or circumstance.'

'How could I ever forget it?' breathed Dasha as the old droshky swung away from the wide avenue she still remembered as the Nevsky. 'But, Frossia,' she went on coaxing, 'we might just run across the bridge and see the island for a few minutes. We need not go as far as Maly Prospect . . .'

'Later,' said Frossia. 'Besides, you can sit quietly and adore the Moyka from the window. She is not a bad little river. Though I don't suppose you are going to do anything quietly today. You will talk and talk. I know some of the things you are going to say. You dislike Kraspole. You would much prefer to be here. But Kraspole is not a place to hate. It is a tiny bit like Leningrad, and your mother needs you, I think. Dashenka, I want you to take Kraspole in a beautiful way. You can do it!'

Dasha went crimson.

'Kraspole has a street called Dubovaya, and Dubovaya is a piece of ornamental water, completely stagnant, and richly covered with dead leaves. That is not my imagination, Frossia. Someone else said it. But never mind Kraspole, we have the whole of today, just to ourselves and Leningrad. All right, Frossia, I will worship the Moyka, and drink tea, and eat a whole ham, if it pleases you—but Maly Prospect must not be forgotten.'

The droshky stopped at the yard gates of a small grey house in a narrow lane behind Mariinsky Square. They crossed the yard and mounted a dim, none too wide, staircase. They came to the third floor, and the landing window gave Dasha a whimsical curve of the Moyka, glittering green in the August sunlight, with the dark ruins of the old prison sharply etched on the opposite bank. The scene was washed in grey and green, and suggested peace not often found in the heart of a living city.

'Well,' said Frossia, 'what did I tell you? You need not start on

that arduous pilgrimage all at once.' She unlocked the red baize door, and led the way through a small bare hall into a fairly large room which looked all the bigger for its bareness. A long table, a desk, a few cane-bottomed chairs, bookshelves, and two old-fashioned armchairs with spindle legs and seats covered in faded green rep—there was no other furniture—and a big stone jar, filled with the branches of some delicately leafed pale yellow shrub, gave the room its only immediate beauty, yet nothing within those bare grey walls was either ugly or angular. The room had peace and orderliness stamped upon it, qualities of a depth which mere outward tidiness could never have expressed. It was a home, thought Dasha, which could only have been created by Frossia and Igor, where their shared thought had flowered and lived, where a delicately edged sense of proportion left no room for unnecessary irritants in a day's busy life. She looked at the pale yellow shrub, and her heart quailed, as she thought of Dubovaya Street in Kraspole.

'We have been here for ten years,' said Frossia, 'and we are lucky—we have two whole rooms, that tiny hall, and a kitchen all to ourselves. We store our winter fuel in the hall. The kitchen has a very stubborn *plita*, the taps occasionally go on strike, and we have to use oil lamps. All the same, it is a haven, and our neighbours are pleasant enough folk. They have unbounded curiosity, of course, and they think we are odd, I suppose—but I love them all. Yes, I know, the windows are uncurtained and we have no carpets, but you see, Dashenka, neither Igor nor I could live without books,' she laughed at the thickly serried shelves, 'and what is a carpet after all? The floor boards are quite good enough.'

'What is Igor doing?'

'Well, his heart nearly broke when railway permits came to an end. You will remember that poky little room at Warsaw Station. The work meant little to him, but people mattered, and he saw people from morning till night, and listened to their fantastic stories, and refused bribes, and frowned on flattery and, in brief, was as happy as he could be. Now he is working at the Railway Union Education Centre—it is close here, just behind the theatre.'

'Frossia,' Dasha said suddenly, 'is it true that once, years ago, someone asked you to go to South America? Yes, I believe you told me yourself. Were you ever sorry you did not go—at the time when things went on being difficult?'

Frossia smiled.

'Ever sorry? Scores of times, Dashenka. Even though I had Igor. I suppose we were all a bit tired, and I wondered if I could go on teaching. There were days when I felt too stupid even for a mere spelling lesson. Much later we had another famine, in 1931, not as cruel as the first one—but bad enough. Sometimes I felt too weary to put on my goloshes. But I think I am glad now that I stayed, glad in a quiet way. I get impatient and angry, and I feel weary sometimes, but I have seen so much happen, life moving and growing and deepening on every side . . .' suddenly she moved to the door. 'I must begin wrestling with the *plita*. If the wood is damp we may have to wait hours for tea, and you must sit and be quiet.'

But Dasha followed her into the small, dim kitchen.

'Wait, Frossia, yes, even the tea can wait,' she spoke slowly, choosing her words, 'if you had not written so much and so often, I think I would have asked them to let me stay on. I might have learnt a trade or something. But I wanted to be back—I wanted you.'

Frossia laughed, her eyes on the kindling in her hands.

'Not me, Dashenka, not me alone. The city was calling you. She wanted you back, and you knew it. Now go, I might lose my temper because the kindling is damp, and my temper is not pretty. Go, Dasha, there is the armchair and the Moyka for you.'

chapter two

ORNAMENTAL WATER

I

IN the Sixth Line of Vassily Island stood a severe ochre-coloured block of flats tenanted by people who worked in factories and offices. The young clerk from the Chemical Trust, who had a room on the fifth floor, thought he had got up early enough to use the telephone on the small landing outside the communal kitchen when a bright yellow skirt swished past him.

'Olga Petrovna! Only a minute . . . A tiny minute! Absolutely important,' he pleaded in a voice thick with tears: Nadia and he had quarrelled overnight, he might find her gone to the office, and his last chance would vanish, but how could he explain his heart to that dry, ugly, middle-aged woman?

'Olga Petrovna!'

But her thin tanned hand already gripped the receiver. The young clerk, a towel across his shoulder, hitched up his grey trousers, and waited sombrely. The woman took no notice of him. Her seamed shrivelled face close to the receiver, she began in a high-pitched voice:

'Frossia? It is Olga. I came here from Moscow yesterday. Listen, there is an important Georgian art exhibition at the Academy. Coming? You have a guest? Bring her along. Showing Leningrad to her? Nonsense, it is raining. How can you show Leningrad in the rain. All the trams will be packed! All right, never mind the exhibition, but I must see you. I have had such experiences in Perm. I shall be with you in an hour, say, two hours, or, possibly, three. I must unpack and finish a report. Tomorrow? I am sure I could not. I may be gone North tomorrow. Yes, yes, I shall come about twelve.' She clicked the receiver back into its place and grinned at

the young clerk. 'There you are, tell her you never meant a word of it, tell her how much you love her, and she will laugh, and you can buy her some flowers from the old man by Nicholas Bridge—'

'Olga Petrovna, that is absolutely unnecessary.'

But she was running away into the kitchen, past a shabby screen, towards the corner where the taps were. She shook her arms and shoulders out of the faded pink kimono and spilt cold water over her face and neck. She was rubbing herself with a hard yellow towel when a child's flaxen head peeped from behind the screen, and Olga Petrovna said severely:

'That is bad manners. Either come in or get out, but don't peep.'

The child made a face and scurried away, and presently Olga Petrovna heard the mother grumble down the passage:

'A school teacher, I ask you, citizens, and never knows how to speak to a child! A good thing she is a bird of passage. Nobody could stand much of her on this floor.'

Olga Petrovna pursed her pale thin lips and rubbed her neck still harder. It was true that she could not endure children out of school hours when they ceased to be pupils and were just children, alive and tiresome, and desperately, dangerously lovable. Children, away from their school background, hurt like so many sharp knives set against living flesh, and Olga Petrovna never cried in public.

She was back in her room down the narrow stuffy passage. The cheaply curtained window gave a generous reach of the Neva. Otherwise there was little beauty about the room. Bed, chair, table and chest, all of poorly varnished deal, summed up the furniture. Over the bed, in a tawdry oxidised frame, hung a feeble reproduction of an Aivassovsky seascape. The furniture and the floor were covered with tumbled clothes, half-wrapped provisions, papers, copy-books, bottles of ink. From the chest a crimson plush parrot lorded it over the chaos.

She must unpack properly, pull her report into shape, dress, tidy her hair, and go to Frossia. Because she had no time to waste, Olga Petrovna sat on the tumbled bed, blew a vague kiss to the parrot, and stared out of the window.

'Of course, I am not crying,' she muttered, wiping her eyes fiercely. 'She is right, I never do know how to speak to a child away from school . . . And I want my morning tea, and that means going to the communal kitchen. I had better do without it.' She opened the window, and in the falling rain she heard a lullaby she would once have given her life to sing. '*Dushenka*,' she whispered, staring at the crimson parrot, but the softly accented endearment was not meant for him.

Olga Petrovna was a *staroverka*, an old Believer, bred in an almost cloistral home in Kiev. Her parents were still alive in 1917. What then happened to her came to be repeated in countless lives, but not everybody had Olga Petrovna's parents. She was not afraid of their anger, for they would have shown none, but she refused to deepen the darkness of their evening hour. Food was scarce in Kiev, she talked of flour and bread being plentiful in Moscow shops, and she went to Moscow with their blessing. Later she remembered that year as a knife thrust into her, a hand turning the knife round and round until all of her came under the slashing, and she crouched and wept, torn by a hunger she could neither understand nor get rid of.

She returned to Kiev and, some years later, her home and parents gone, she offered herself as a student at a teachers' training college in Moscow.

Now she was back from there, having gone to the mobile teachers' annual conference. There she read her lengthy report, won great applause, and provoked a thin trickle of acid criticism. 'Olga Petrovna will jump from one subject to another. We would like her to be a little more consecutive,' and she smiled, aware that criticism could not hurt her. She had made a success of every new venture and knew herself recognised as a valued worker. She was indefatigable; distance never appalled her, nor the inevitable difficulties of travel. She would go from Kola to Georgia, from Vitebsk to Tomsk, and back again. Some of the pupils whom she had once taught the alphabet were now proven engineers, teachers, doctors, even astronomers and geologists. Olga Petrovna burned at her work all the more fiercely because she remembered and

served her own unborn child in all the children she taught. To her industry and genuine knowledge of the job Olga Petrovna added a vehement love which, on more sober occasions, she denied angrily.

'Fool . . . Fool . . .'

She now plunged into a vortex of activity, swept one pile of papers from the floor to the bed, and another from the bed to the floor, pulled off the faded kimono and yellow skirt, jumped into an ordinary grey dress, tried to tidy her wispy slate-coloured hair, and reached Frossia's flat in less than an hour.

She stood panting in the doorway.

'The stairs, *dushenka*. Fifth floor at home, third floor here. Give me a peasant hut every time.'

'Here is Dasha,' began Frossia, but Olga Petrovna darted to the table.

'Who did that?' she pointed at a small wooden goose.

'Why, Dasha. We were talking very late last night, and she got hold of a piece of wood, and—'

But Olga Petrovna was not listening. She held the goose in both hands, her faded eyes warm, her thin lips soft.

'Why, it is fine! It is genuine. Do you belong to an artel? Where are you working? Who taught you? Why, it is an artist's work . . . *Golubushka*, where have you tumbled from?'

'The Crimea,' Dasha stammered. 'They taught me a little at the sanatorium. But I have never done anything,' she broke off, hesitating to say more in front of that sudden bewildering woman.

'Never done anything? Rubbish! Genuine handicraft is so important. The exhibitions I have seen! Now this goose—'

'It is not a goose really,' Dasha began, and Olga Petrovna broke in angrily:

'Don't you go muddling yourself! Of course it is a goose.' She turned to Frossia. 'I went to see Zubrov in Moscow. There was a canvas on the easel. All rings and squares—in red and grey. "Well," I said to him, "something new, teaching geometry in colour, only your greys are too uncertain, children will never be struck by them. Make them a good strong blue," and Zubrov nearly hit me.

"Geometry?" he yelled. "You blind owl! It is a girl practising on the piano." I kept quiet. I understand none of it. So you need not tell me that your goose is a water-can. However, what are you going to do?"

'She is going to her mother at Kraspole,' explained Frossia.

'I have friends there. An old Englishwoman who used to paint or something. No, no, she was a governess. And there is Lev Kirillich. Yes, decidedly, Lev Kirillich will help you. Go and say Olga Petrovna has sent you. He is a grand old man,' her eyes were tired no longer, they shone with excitement. 'He fought in five wars. Now he fights slugs in the garden, and he is happy making his toys. He made my crimson parrot,' she explained to Frossia, 'and he tells me the work has taken years off him. He never went to school and learnt his letters ten years ago. He looks like an old Russian *bogatyr* from Vladimir's court in Kiev—you can imagine him in helmet and mail. Now give me my morning tea, Frossia, *golubushka*, and I will tell you about Perm.' Here Olga Petrovna put her hand to her forehead and shrieked, 'Is your clock right? Why, Filipov is waiting for me. They have made such a muddle over my new posters. "Learning is life and joy" in black on grey! I ask you? Is a mobile school a cemetery? I must have blue and red. Oh dear, Frossia, I will telephone you this evening. Now Filipov is waiting, and Smolny is at the other end of the world.' She embraced them both and ran out.

'Frössia,' Dasha staggered to the nearest chair, is she real or has she come out of a book?"

'Olga Petrovna,' Frossia measured some tea into a small blue teapot, 'could not have been explained to you. You had to meet her. She is one of those people who made it possible for me to put on my goloshes on a rainy day. I met her first in a bread queue nearly nine years ago. She was having a bitter quarrel with a man for having pushed a woman out of her place. Half an hour later the man's turn came and he found out he must have lost his cards or something. Anyway, Olga Petrovna shared her ration with him. Then I pounced on her. It did not take her by surprise—she pounces

on people all along the way. She muddles and does bewilder one at first, but I have been glad of her many a dark day.' Frossia threw in a brief sketch of Olga Petrovna's life.

'Yes,' said Dasha, 'somehow she burns like a fruited orange tree at sunset. And I will go and see Lev Kirillich—though she left no address. And, please, Frossia, I never meant it to be a goose at all.'

'I think I understand.'

The weather had not been kind to them the day before; the promise of the morning was broken by a violent storm almost before they had finished eating, and Frossia had banned excursions. They had talked late into the night, and now in the quiet, book-crowded room they sat over their tea, both conscious that the twelve years had made no gulf between them. They had been together before, they were together now, and they would not be parted when Dasha went to Kraspole. She had given Frossia a richly detailed picture of the Crimea days, mentioning her few carving lessons in so shy a voice that Frossia guessed she was being allowed a glimpse of something so uncertainly and delicately budded that the least clumsy touch might mean an ultimate and irrevocable catastrophe. She listened and asked no questions.

But the rain stopped. Dasha longed for the streets and spaces of the city, and out they came into a newly washed, adventurous world of wind, cloud, water, and shining stone. Dasha insisted on boarding a tram packed so tight there would have been no room even for the proverbial apple to fall. Everything enchanted her. The rich sun-washed Crimean scene now seemed as though it had been but imagined. She had truly loved it, but it was too dazzling, Southern and alien to be accepted by her northern heart as an intimate permanence. The very years were folded away, and Dasha walked about, the child she still was, secretly anxious about Kraspole, her stepfather, the coral ear-rings, and the future, and yet so genuinely happy that even Vera Efremovna would have been satisfied.

The future looked as dark as a hedge on a moonless night. Lev Kirillich might or might not prove helpful, Kraspole become an

unlovely and unloved stage on a difficult journey, and even in her mother Dasha might yet find a surprised and hesitant stranger, but now the blue and gold autumnal day was wholly hers, and she walked along the quays, telling Frossia it was like a saint's day for her, leaning over the granite parapet, and watching the Neva.

'Well, you will have the sea at Kraspole,' Frossia reminded her, but Dasha shook her white-capped head.

They did mad and foolish and wearying things; they crossed Nicholas Bridge and went down the incredibly altered Maly Prospect. The squalid timbered house had gone, but Dasha stood on the rough shining cobbles, and knew she could still see it.

'Do you remember the queue at that co-operative store at the corner? I used to count the people, but their numbers grew so fast I had always to give it up in the middle, and here is the very same lamp post,' she looked up, a little anxious lest the eagerness in her voice were not understood, but Frossia's smile reassured her.

'You were so tiny. Fancy that little mind of yours enjoying movement when you could not move at all. . .'

They wandered across Exchange Bridge to Petrograd Side, lost themselves in the cluster of lanes behind Church gardens, made their way back to Bolshoy Prospect, picked up a tram, and went past Kamennostrovsky corner, across another bridge, and back from the quays to Mariinsky Square, and the flat with the books and green rep armchairs.

'They have built so much,' mused Dasha. 'It will take me time to learn everything—but something is always the same.'

Yet the day was over. She must face Kraspole. At the Baltisky Station Frossia held her very close.

'Little Dashenka, will you remember that unpleasant things are so often just accidents—like dust on a chair. You sweep them off, you don't let them get inside you.'

But Dasha clung to Frossia in silence, and all the way to Kraspole, as the little green train was rolling on towards the dim yellow plains of old Ingermanlandia, Dasha thought of Leningrad, Frossia, Igor, and the wooden bird she had forgotten to pack.

The train slowed down. The late afternoon sun flashed on a bearded porter's metal badge. Dasha staggered out of the coach. There was no one to meet her.

2

Dasha stared at the narrow deserted platform. The porter watched her.

'They were to meet me,' she faltered.

'Well, people have short memories.'

'It is Dubovaya, 47,' for no reason she repeated the number and blushed.

'Some way to go, *grajdanka*. I might fetch you a *drosliky*—or, perhaps, you would wait—'

But Dasha would not wait. In the same shrunken voice she asked the way. The man explained gruffly and added:

'You could not manage those baskets all by yourself.'

'Oh yes, I can,' she said untruthfully.

Outside the station she found an ordinary street of common brick and timber houses and narrow pavements. It was the one street in Kraspole which refused to remember the palace, park and sea. It looked suburban. The houses were so many faces of bitter, buttoned-up, disillusioned people who had once asked for clean linen and been given dirty rough sacking instead, and Dasha did not yet know that, away from that stifling street, Kraspole's evenings and nights belonged to winds and trees.

It was late afternoon, and the street bristled with people hurrying past, all busy, all small closed-in worlds in themselves. Half-way down Dasha realised she had forgotten the porter's none too detailed directions. She stopped, but everybody she saw looked too preoccupied. Then she noticed an old woman come out of the co-operative store, her arms laden with small parcels. The woman wore a curiously old-fashioned purple jacket, but she had an air of leisure about her, and her eyes observed Dasha with candid and kindly curiosity.

'Dubovaya? Why, I live there, and we can walk together. You must be a stranger, and how tanned you are! What number did you say?'

'Forty-seven.'

The old woman stopped so abruptly that some of her parcels were spilt on the pavement.

'You must be Dasha, then? Dasha Utina? Oh, I must kiss you. We are neighbours, and isn't it fortunate that my housekeeper has a cold and I had to go out shopping? Anna Trofimovna was to have met you. It is my fault, *golubushka*, her new violet dress was not ready, and she said she had nothing else smart enough to wear except her pink dressing-gown, and nobody could go to the station in their dressing-gown, could they? Not now, anyway, when we are getting so particular everywhere, even government clerks have taken to wearing ties, and they fine you if you spit at the cinema. Anna Trofimovna is waiting at home. It is late for dinner, but she said they would keep some goose for you.' She drew her breath and went on: 'I am Barina, just Barina; it sounds silly, but nobody calls me anything else. I am an unimportant useless old body, *dushenka*. Now there is Nil Ilyich, a difficult man sometimes, but so generous and important that you must not mind his being difficult. Life is not a napkin to fold as you wish, and, at least, there is plenty to eat, and Nil Ilyich is a kind man. I hear you are to work at the Food Trust. You are lucky. A pleasant job and a comfortable wage, and such nice girls. I make their clothes, you know.'

Dasha did not. Tired, hot and bewildered, she could follow but a few shreds of the monologue, but old Barina never expected either questions or answers, and went on with her brittle chatter until they came to Dubovaya, No. 47, where she left Dasha with another abrupt kiss.

'... Ornamental water . . . richly covered with dead leaves . . .'

She swept the words out of her mind, and saw a little gate, a narrow path, flanked by lilac leafage, and three wooden steps leading to a small railed-off balcony. She went up. The green-painted door stood closed, and her imagination would not see it open; she

stood and observed the small house and its square windows proud with their heavy green curtains. It was August, the lilac had done with its flowering hour, and the oval-shaped bed of pink and mauve asters under the windows looked far too definite and formal to let any wildness play about in the garden, but Dasha guessed that even in the free, wide-flung adventure of spring days the house would keep its own identity. For a second she stood and hesitated, her baskets on the ground. If she went back, Frossia would understand, and yet thinking of Frossia carried Dasha back to Maly Prospect and to the days of the piteously small and heroically shared dole of herrings and rusks.

'No,' she said to Leningrad, turned the door handle, and found herself in a stuffy, shadowy hall, smelling of violet soap, freshly baked bread and onions. Out of the dimness came a voice she knew she must recognise and could not.

'Dasha, Dashenka, my joy, *radost moyá*. We have kept the goose hot for you, but was the train early? Oh, it is all so sudden. And we must keep quiet. Nil Ilyich is resting.'

Hampers and all, Dasha was drawn into another dim room where free movement seemed difficult because of the furniture. Awkwardly she stumbled against one chair and another, heard a sequence of subdued 'sh-sh's', and at last she stood by the window where she could draw breath, look, see, and wonder. The voice had changed, it rang plump, it had the deep rich colour of an over-baked saffron bun. Nor could the face be imagined against the Maly Prospect background. In those raw bleeding years who could have used cosmetics or put scarlet on their nails? The rustle of the gorgeous pink dressing-gown added but another alien note to the strange theme, yet the eyes and the voice, however changed, had love in them, and Dasha answered kiss with kiss.

'Dashenka, sh-sh, don't speak so loudly. He will get up presently, and then we will talk at our ease. But did you wipe your feet? It rained hard all the morning. Goodness, you have no goloshes on. And that is a Bokhara rug, *dushenka*. Now I must see to the goose . . .'

'Mama, *mamochka*, never mind the goose. I am not hungry. Keep still, I want to look at you . . .'

'Dashenka, don't be unkind. What do you mean about the goose? Food is so important. Oh, my little light, *sweetik moy*, it is heavenly seeing you, but your freckles are terrible. I must lend you my cream. Sh-sh, never mind your baskets. And did you get me any silk stockings?'

Dasha sat down.

'Stockings?' she echoed; 'no, I am sorry, we never went to Odessa.'

'Dead leaves?' she thought, 'dead leaves covered with scarlet nail varnish and cherry-coloured rouge, fringed with pink taffeta, and all sprinkled with lilac powder. I shall smell it all my life. And I must not laugh, and it would be futile to cry. All of it is just an accidental little sketch scrawled on some margin or other. No, I don't want to laugh. She is lovable. I love her. I do love her.' She sat, trying to assure herself of an uncertainty when the door opened and Nil Ilyich came in and, seeing him, Dasha knew that if she were to laugh at him he would never forgive her, and that if she were to say that people were boxes and that words could be wings, he would think her mad.

Nil Ilyich came in, glossy, shining and pleasant. He kissed her. His breath smelt of tobacco and his cheeks of strongly scented soap. He stood, rubbing his fat hands and smiling, and Dasha found she had nothing to say.

'You are shy,' he gave a fat little laugh, lit the bronze lamp over the table, and threw the dead match into a wooden bowl on a bamboo whatnot. 'We are very tidy here,' he explained. 'Everything must have its place in a house and in life.'

'It all looks comfortable.'

He stood, thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, looking at her.

'How young you are!'

'I am nearly twenty-one.'

'I know your age,' he spoke patiently, 'I meant that you look very young.'

'Yes . . .'

Dasha felt that she could not use her own language to him, and she had no other speech, and she also knew that her monosyllables annoyed him. The smile had gone from his face, and he rubbed his hands hurriedly and noisily. 'He looks like a pink satin cushion rubbed with butter,' thought Dasha, and could not even pretend to a hint of a smile.

Anna Trofimovna bustled in. The goose appeared, followed by a huge copper samovar. Nil Ilyich moved nearer, examined the table, and frowned:

'We must not have cherry jam today, Ania. We had it yesterday. We ought to be having raspberry.'

'I have run out of it—' stammered Anna Trofimovna. 'Dashenka, here is the goose.'

'It does not matter for once,' Nil Ilyich turned to Dasha, 'you have lived in a sanatorium so long you must know the value of routine—it makes for a well-spent day. Well, do you know stenography?'

'No,' she said briefly, and he rubbed one glossy cheek.

'How extraordinary! Did they teach you typewriting?'

'No.'

'Do you know book-keeping?'

Dasha shook her head.

'What an odd education! What then did they teach you?'

'The usual things. I was not much good at any of them. Later,' she tossed her head and smiled at her mother, but Anna Trofimovna, preoccupied with the samovar, never answered her, 'I chose a handicraft. I had some lessons in carving,' she added, conscious of bewilderment and disapproval spreading over the stuffy, heavily furnished room, 'I used to make boxes and things. They promised me a job in Moscow,' she lied, digging her fork into the goose.

Nil Ilyich pushed his empty glass towards Anna Trofimovna. He had done with disapproval.

'That is a mere hobby,' anger thickened his voice, 'and hobbies have no place in these great and strenuous days. There is no room

for idlers. He who does not work shall not eat. I was going to tell you that I got you a clerk's job at my office—a worthwhile, well-paid job. But how could I introduce an ignorant clerk? You will have to be trained now—and that means a few months' delay. Most tiresome !'

'I am sorry—you did not understand,' Dasha schooled herself to speak quietly, 'I mean to work. And I would be no good as a clerk. I always muddle figures—'

Nil Ilyich tossed his napkin on the floor and walked out.

'Dashenka,' wailed Anna Trofimovna, 'you should not have been so brusque with him. He means well. He works so hard.' The painted lips shook tremulously. 'He has done so much for me. And we have put you into such a nice room—satin curtains and all. Please be nice to him.'

'I will, *mamochka*. I am sorry. I am just tired . . .'

She was tired and bitterly unsure of herself. Alone with Anna Trofimovna, she clung to her, weeping and laughing, but with that cowed, painted, silk-gowned woman Dasha could no longer imagine herself a crippled child, the soft rain blessing her upturned face, nor even the girl who, a few hours earlier, had gloried in the clean rapture of the waters and skies of Leningrad. Here, in Dubovaya, she was the same Dasha who could invent a cheap story for the sake of winning an equally cheap trinket, and tell purposeless lies about uncles and jobs waiting for her . . .

3

Dasha had forgotten to pack her wooden goose and, returning from Baltisky Station, Frossia saw it at once and smiled a little ruefully. Dasha had talked so much and said so little. The little bird, carved so inconsequentially, offered its own story, but Frossia felt uncertain of having read it right. Dasha was back, cured, grown, matured, outwardly happy, and almost dazed with the sense of

many opening doors, yet there seemed some thickly curtained corners in her.

'What am I thinking about?' Frossia checked herself. 'She is back, and I love her, and I have Igor, my full, abiding satisfaction, so many friends, and my work. The little goose will sooner or later cease to be a signpost.'

It was quiet in the room. The pale bare walls went shadowy, and Frossia had work to do, but she would not light the lamp. Dasha's coming meant the unlocking of many a room in Frossia's own house. Here and there, the sun shone almost too boldly; again all outline of wall and ceiling stood stolen by shadows. But whether light or dark, all the rooms had life in them. Dasha seemed uncertain. Frossia, too, had known sharp uncertainties of herself, circumstance, and people. She had begun her work in dim and uncharted times when her mind had to grope from one instant to another, and the body must steel itself to accept privation and absolute lack as though those were the true constants of life.

'At least Dasha can begin in much quieter waters,' thought Frossia, 'even my acceptance of Igor was such a storm.'

She remembered meeting that quiet, surprisingly learned railway clerk. Their friendship grew on argument, rejection of each other's preferences, and almost wounding intolerance, and yet that same intolerance died so suddenly she could never later account for its going. Both of them ended by accepting each other so wholly that their respective frontiers were left inviolate. At first Frossia could not understand it, nor would she have desired any hurried bestowal of a map to the newly discovered kingdom.

'And now we remain our separate selves, and yet we are sunk in each other. Now, with him six hundred versts away, I still have him—now and always. That precious sense of alwaysness—is that the most one can see of immortality? I am here in this beloved quiet home, I have just had dearest Dasha to stay with me, I am blessed in my work, I am more than blessed in Igor, and even my wide world stands unvalled at times, and "now" has nothing to say to mere time, and none of it has happened because of our

passion—neither of us is fiery enough—but because of our peace which is not the end of a quest but its beginning.’

On her way home she had bought some bronze-crimson dahlias, and now put them into a dark grey bowl. The brightly burnished faces of the flowers looked into her eyes. ‘Even they seem to understand,’ murmured Frossia, her senses glad of the bitter earthy smell. ‘But I would not mind if they died dry and broken this very instant, and the roof fell, and all sound ceased,’ she started, almost wondering if she had invited all those to come under her roof-tree, ‘I would then remember, but of Igor I would have more than memories.’

She had work to do, but she cheated the pink-faced clock by stealing a few minutes to stand, her small hands quiet, all of her gathered up into a deep and thankful recognition. She moved to the huge table and looked at the stack of manuscript. There were all the essays on Baudelaire and Flaubert, and a set of examination papers to correct. Yet her mind, for once refusing to consider discipline, wandered back to Dasha. Kraspole, Frossia decided, would have to be but a wayside inn. Suburban communities, all the world over, were cast in an identical mould. Lovers of a uniformly accepted surface found themselves at home there, and rebels, too, perhaps, whose sharpened sense of the absurd and the limited made it possible for them to delve below the surface. But Dasha belonged elsewhere.

The telephone rang. Moscow wanted her. Frossia waited, and heard the clear, coldly impersonal voice of an acquaintance. She listened and spoke loudly:

‘Yes, of course, I shall take the midnight express. I can ring up the college at once, and Maria Osipovna will deal with the examination papers.’ She paused, and then went on, her left hand very small and white against the back of the chair. ‘Can you hear me, Semen Platonych? Please tell Igor I shall be with him in the morning.’

The roof had not fallen, but all sound ceased in the room. Semen Platonych, a casual acquaintance, had spoken in a clipped formal manner. It was better to have all feeling exiled from terrible

words, thought Frossia, the least touch of warmth might have made them unbearable, and she must bear being told that there was no longer a chance of a successful operation, that very soon Igor would never again see the rain, or children's faces, or her own eyes.

'Yes, the midnight express,' she said, her eyes on the unfinished work. She telephoned to several people and wired to Dasha. She packed clothes, some books and bedding—at such short notice she could hardly expect a sleeping-berth. She tidied the study and the bedroom. She did not hurry. She remembered details. She slipped a book into her bag and packed some food. Then she closed the door on the darkened flat and the dahlias forsaken in the grey china bowl.

4

Frossia's wire came in the morning when finely spun rain wept all over the garden and Dubovaya, and at once Dasha's own skies were darkened. Frossia said she was being called off to Moscow, she mentioned no other details, nor suggested a date for her possible return, and Dasha felt pushed into a narrow room with no view from the windows. The rain left off, hot August sun blessed the wet cobbles, but her sense of desolation deepened all the more sharply against the shining outward scene.

Days went on, and she learnt that at No. 47, Dubovaya, she would feel no shame if she purloined things, lost her temper, or told blatantly impossible stories. There were too many curtains, carpets and cushions in the house, and they determined its atmosphere. Within those darkly papered walls Dasha lived, her mind, dusty and intolerant. She never mentioned either Olga Petrovna or Lev Kirillich. She avoided speaking of Frossia. She seldom discussed the Crimea. She soon found out that to Anna Trofimovna the past years were so many blurs. Warm comfort and security had broken for her the evening she met Nil Ilyich, and she refused to look beyond that evening.

However, places, as well as people, could still be boxes with their

lids down, and Dasha must needs admit that Kraspole was painted gaily enough. The trees were in full leafage, and women's light muslin dresses brought a hint of expectant buoyancy to the pale timbered houses. Dasha discovered the lane behind the park, and the wood where old larches and pines were so northern that her heart all but smote her for not loving the place as it deserved to be loved. She tried to learn its ways. She went to the park to see the faded pale face of the Palace from a distance, and thought of Kirill Markovich, but felt too shy to intrude. In the evenings Kraspole took its leisure candidly and loudly. The open-air amusement centre flowered out with coloured lights. There was a queue at the cinema doors. A balalayka orchestra, on a brief visit from Leningrad, filled a green and red pavilion with the plaintive themes of folk-lore songs. The big one-storied restaurant, 'Red Samovar', was crowded with students, clerical workers, tired men and women from the factories on the outskirts of Kraspole. Dasha liked the Red Samovar: it looked absurd and rather pathetic, low and sprawling, bright scarlet shutters to its unevenly spaced windows, low-lintelled doors which could not close properly and, by daytime, the avenues of small red enamelled tables, empty and dusty, looked like little children who had lost their way to a party. They went there to drink lemonade one evening. Anna Trofimovna grumbled that there was no vacant table, but Dasha raced to the nearest chair, tumbled into it, and laughed, and the man opposite boomed:

'And where is the fun fair?'

Dasha stared, recognized him, and laughed again. Olga Petrovna's description had been true. 'Helmet and mail, and you would see a *bogatyr*.' The huge head, tumbling grey hair, enormous beard, scarred face, and a boy's bewildered blue eyes were all there, and Dasha did not hesitate.

'You are Lev Kirillich. Olga Petrovna said I was to come and see you. I met her in Leningrad a few weeks ago.'

'And why haven't you been?'

'I had no address.'

'Olga would forget it, God save her. Well, the little cottage in

the yard behind No. 43, Dubovaya. Come any morning.' He never asked her name or business, got up, and limped away, and Anna Trofimovna hurried, glass in hand, to the vacant chair.

'Why did you speak to him, *dushenka*?'

'Oh—some friends of mine knew him in Leningrad.'

'*Darmoyed*—that is what he is. Eaten other folks' bread all his life, and now wastes his time making toys. I ask you, *milochka*, at a time like ours, to be making toys! And somebody in Moscow once gave him a warrant to travel and see an exhibition in Yaroslav, I think. Whoever heard of such tomfoolery?' Anna Trofimovna ordered a second lemonade. 'All the same, I must not forget to invite him. He is a valuable guest. He plays the accordion. So he must come to the party.'

'What party?'

'Dashenka, have you got hay in your head? What party? Have I not had enough argument with Nil Ilyich? He does not like parties. But he has consented now that you have come, and he has brought some marvellous shell-fish in a tin—from South America, and he says we must have things done properly. Sandwiches must be covered, a double piece of bread, you understand. They do it in foreign countries. Nil Ilyich has read about it in a paper.'

'Yes,' Dasha said limply.

She had been used to parties in the Crimea. They would have music, dancing, and speeches, and a film might be shown, and there would be more speeches, everything was big and tumbled together most happily. Sometimes the food was gorgeous and lavish, and sometimes they stayed content with dry biscuits, pale coffee, and weirdly coloured fruit drinks, but always those were wide, exhilarating things, everybody swept in, talking rubbish, and enjoying it. 'A party makes one forget all dust in life,' Vera Efremovna used to say.

The party at No. 47 was a nightmare. Nil Ilyich, having doled out instructions about shell-fish and sandwiches, came to regard it as an important occasion and stamped it so heavily with look and

word that any light-hearted gesture of gaiety wilted, a flower left without water, whenever he was in the room.

Old Barina came and brought Valia whom Dasha liked well enough, but Valia kept at a distance. Lev Kirillich came without his accordion, and Anna Trofimovna's greeting was soaked in vinegar. A small woman came with beautifully brushed silver hair and lovely hands, whom they all called 'Miss', and who spoke Russian slowly as if the words were so many separate pieces of bright silk and she could not handle many of them at a time. There was a soberly coloured cluster of middle-aged clerks from the Food Trust and their wives, who stood, their mouths agape at Anna Trofimovna's 'covered' sandwiches. The party was for Dasha, and there were two or three bemused and hungry looking young men from the college, their white shirts clean but pathetically frayed at the throat.

Conversation hung in stray, thin wisps until old Barina tiptoed to the main table, her hands folded, and sighed for rapture.

'Life would be a dark desert if it were not for food.'

One of the young students laughed harshly:

'Food is an accidental. You need have but little of it, and you ought not to think of it.'

Old Barina answered by a piteous glance. The shell-fish, garlanded by sprays of 'ukrop', interested her, and she would not waste her time on a reply, but 'Miss' measured the young student with a faintly ironical look.

'The accidental—in its very lack—can become an essential. You would think so if you had known real famine, young man. Mere hunger can't teach that. But famine is a miracle-worker. It makes you fall down and worship a mildewed crust . . .'

'Not quite mildewed, "Miss",' Barina shook her head and crossed herself. Nil Ilyich, his podgy hands clasping a bottle, frowned so obviously that Dasha had to smother a giggle, but Barina was not perturbed by her host's disapproval. She ate as if she were truly occupied in prayer, her eyes closed, all of her withdrawn into a dim enclosure where none but those

acquainted with the story of long past hunger, could have followed her.

In a corner, seated on the green plush sofa, and encircled by her loyal intimates from the Food Trust office, Anna Trofimovna was saying loudly:

'I remember my grandmother telling it to me scores of times. "Go out at midnight," she would say, "find a live frog, throw it into an ant-heap, and come back in the morning. You will find nothing but a tiny bone left. Once you carry that bone in your pocket, no woman would refuse you anything".'

The cronies listened, entranced. One of the students smiled.

'Surely you never believed such nonsense—'

'It is not nonsense. My great-uncle did it, and the girl was a count's daughter. She did not refuse—but no good came of it. They found him out, and I think they hanged him, and she went into a nunnery, so it is not nonsense.'

'Anja,' frowned Nil Ilyich, 'we must have some more apple *pastila*,' and she blushed, fidgeted, and turned to food again.

'He is not a box at all,' thought Dasha, 'he is a tin—with a lid that keeps snapping down,' and suddenly she saw him smile at her from over the brim of his glass. He had never done it before, and the smile was oily with encouragement and forgiveness. It said 'you are more enlightened than your mother, and we understand each other. I forgive your brusqueness that first evening. I like your blue dress, and your coral ear-rings suit you. This is your party, please enjoy yourself' said the smile, but Dasha's lips stayed set in a cold unresponsive line, and she moved away to offer mushroom patties to Lev Kirillich.

'Yes, I am coming tomorrow,' she said, 'truly I am.'

'Come any morning,' he said, refusing the patty. 'I came here because I wanted to have another look at you. Olga Petrovna never mistakes chaff for good grain. Well, you seem safe enough, lass. Now I have seen you I am going. It is my accordion they wanted, not me.'

'Don't go,' Dasha stammered. 'There is no other soul here.'

They are just mouths, and there is enough food. Even the students are the same. I suppose they don't get enough to eat at their place. Please don't go—'

'Fool,' he said gruffly, 'there is "Miss",' and he limped away.

But Dasha was too shy to come near 'Miss'. There remained Valia to whom she would have liked to talk at her case, but Valia chose dim corners, and her smile was an odd deterrent. Once Dasha heard her say to someone 'That burnt patty . . . Let Barina have it. She does not like burnt pastry, but she would be too polite to refuse,' and Dasha felt bewildered: the pale face looked so kindly, the words were spoken in so gentle a voice, and Dasha wished Frossia were there to explain the riddle, and at once remembered that she had not heard from Moscow at all, and her mood went heavily grey. There seemed nothing left but to continue offering food and to think of next morning and Lev Kirillich.

It rained hard all night, and in the morning she must pick her way through ankle-deep brown mud to his barn of a cottage at the back of a neighbouring yard. She found herself in a large, low-ceilinged room, and stared in silent astonishment: walls, bed, table, benches, even window frames, were all painted deep orange. The room looked inviting, sunny and tidy. From a low bench by the window Lev Kirillich raised his huge shaggy head.

'Well, take a look at everything. Olga Petrovna has written about you. You might have come before, but work is not a bear—it will not run away.'

'But I was not certain,' murmured Dasha, staring at the benches where rows of carved wooden dolls, animals, and quaintly roofed houses were arranged with as much precision as though they were meant for an exhibition. 'Oh,' she picked up a small doll in the Ukrainian dress, red and blue on white, 'why, her face says she is going to meet someone in a wood . . .'

'Nonsense,' Lev Kirillich said gruffly, 'or it may be sense. I am a dim man and I can't understand much. But Olga Petrovna must be right when she says you can carve. Listen, here are the tools, and you can have that bench by the window. Come any morning,'

suddenly he glowered, 'but you must not talk at your work. At my own bench I kind of sing songs within me.' He threw back his huge head and laughed a boy's laughter. 'A word is not a wolf's jaw—it won't bite you. And don't you get all swamped up by fools and gluttons. The whole world does not eat out of the same bowl.' Abruptly he turned away from her, the huge scarred hands were busy, and Dasha left the orange-painted room almost on tiptoes. She never looked at the mud under her feet.

She found Anna Trofimovna almost in tears.

'Where have you been? Nina Andreevna passed the house and said they were selling fresh mackerel at the Co-operative. Nil Ilyich is so fond of it.' Dasha seized some money, for once willing to travel to polar regions on any errand whatsoever, but the day decided to keep jostling her out of the only routine acceptable to her intimates. Long before she reached the shop, she ran into the young man in a soiled white shirt buttoned round his throat. He halted, and the thin bearded face twisted in an ironical smile:

'You are a liar . . . That uncle coming to meet you in Moscow! Why, I saw the porter struggle to get you a seat.'

'Well, I wanted to be rid of you.'

'An honest liar,' Kirill jingled some coins in his pocket. 'I have a free hour. You attract me. I can't invite you to the Red Samovar, I have not got enough money for two, but will you come?'

Dasha, swiftly dismissing No. 47 and the fresh mackerel, nodded so vigorously that he laughed, but even his laughter did not jar on her. The morning had a new clean-washed face, she herself was standing in an open doorway, and neither mockery nor abuse could interfere with her fiercely dyed exultation.

The Red Samovar was airless, dusty and empty. They chose a table by the door, and Kirill drawled.

'Well, niece of no uncle, what do you think of Kraspole?'

'Asleep,' and Dasha dug her teeth into a saffron bun.

'Asleep?' Kirill almost upset his glass of tea. 'Stop thinking of that piece of ornamental water. You should not be living there to begin with. Asleep? That old ruin of the palace is throbbing with

life, the factories are working in double shifts. We are steeped in work, we are drunk with it. Asleep? Don't you realise that you belong to a blessed generation which will never know the staleness of middle-age? We shall just stop being young overnight and wake up old and tired enough for a coffin. Asleep?' He drained his glass at one gulp and banged on the table. 'Perhaps you are old already?'

'Never mind about me,' Dasha seized another bun, 'it is silly to quarrel with other people's words. Tell me about yourself?'

'I hope you have the money to pay for your food,' he said severely, 'otherwise they will call in a militiaman, and I can't afford to get mixed up in such sordidness. You do annoy me, but all the same I want you to come to the hostel and meet Gleb. You will probably quarrel and hate each other, and then he will produce an exquisite poem, and I will be left with the knowledge I had not been altogether useless in life. Myself? What do you want to know? I am just a molecule conceived and born in a tumble down hovel in Gavan in Leningrad. You don't know what floods could do to Gavan. My father was a fisherman. People showered rough names on my mother, but she was good to her children. My main hatred is water and my chief passion—sunflower seeds. Gleb hates them and says they are a sign of stunted mentality. We are room-mates,' he added.

'Who is Gleb?' Dasha flashed angrily.

'Why waste my breath on introductions? You must meet him and judge for yourself. He teaches Russian literature, and is a poet. He is too soft, I think, he always forgets there should be a streak of granite in all human beings. Things are hard enough, and life has never been a lump of putty floating in pea-soup. I mistrust softness, and we are turning that way. We are beginning to borrow too much from the past. Yes, even in literature. Take Gladkov's "Cement". That was a book—they can't write that way nowadays. They just wobble, and their pens are broken . . . That worries me. Some years ago a schoolmaster was dismissed for making too much of 1812, Kutuzov, Bagration, and the rest of the Tzar's hirelings, as the school soviet called them. They searched his rooms,

found engravings of Gurko and Skobelev, and wasn't there a row! Well, quite recently I read about that man in a Moscow paper. He has just been re-instated. We are veering back too much.'

'The Tzar's hirelings! What rubbish! And you teach history . . . They saved Russia, and they did it for the country—not for Alexander or Nicholas or whoever was there.'

'Your ignorance is as incredible as a rose on a garbage heap. It was Alexander I. But you talk most appalling unenlightened rot with such an air of wisdom that you might fool anyone.'

She laughed, and his vehemence was instantly defeated.

'You must come to the hostel. Even your foolishness is attractive.'

They stood outside the tawdrily painted Red Samovar. Fierce sunlight was unkind to Kirill: it threw into too sharp relief his shirt, boots and trousers past all repair, his hair and beard unkempt, and his hands not quite clean. His conversation had a jagged edge to it, but Dasha knew she would go to the hostel. Rugged manners were preferable to chatter about cherry jam and fried fish.

'Oh dear, the mackerel!' she remembered and vanished.

It had all gone. They offered her some herrings, and Anna Trofimovna almost brushed them off the table.

'I have tins and tins of them—all in tomato sauce. Nil Ilyich hates them. What shall I do?'

'There is always the cat,' said Dasha, and hurried to her room.

5

She could not sleep much that night. The green satin curtains were drawn apart, and for the first time she learnt that nights at Kraspole wholly belonged to trees and winds. The thickly wooded lane just behind Dubovaya stirred with a music she had not heard before; the rising wind rustled the heavy satin, and she heard frogs quarrelling loudly down in the garden, but even the screech of a distant owl reached her in a muted softened fashion that night. She lay, dreaming and longing for the morning to fall into her eager

hands. She raised them above the thin counterpane. There was no moon, and she could not see her fingers, but she clasped them passionately, demanding that they should fulfil the sweet half-shaped urge of her mind, and she saw herself in that absurd orange-painted room, face and hands happily smudged with daubs of many colours, a song rising and falling in her thought.

'Frossia must know. If she does not write soon, I must write or go to Leningrad,' she murmured, half-conquered by sleep.

In the morning No. 47 was just a place where tea must be drunk, and buttered rolls eaten, and some crockery washed up before she might escape. The morning was sodden grey, and even the gate of the little house looked an enemy determined to keep her out of paradise, but at last the leaden hour lay behind, and she was running across the yard. She opened the door. The orange room looked inviting and bright, but Lev Kirillich was not alone, and, her hand on the knob, Dasha stammered:

'Oh, I should not have come,' she looked with the eyes of a disappointed, frightened gazelle. She had met 'Miss' before, and had heard some disjointed details about her, but 'Miss' was a stranger, and that morning was not meant for strangers, and people, who sat so comfortably on the floor, surrounded by brushes and boxes of paint, did not suggest that they were likely to clear the field for anyone. 'I am sorry,' Dasha stammered again, when Lev Kirillich rose, moved towards the door, and almost pushed her into the room.

'I like the door closed. I don't want every hen in the yard to come messing the floor,' he spoke gruffly, 'and what do you mean that you should not have come? I have work waiting for you.'

'She means me,' 'Miss' said from the floor, 'I have watched you, my dear, you must not mind my frankness—I think you are afraid of most people at Kraspole.' She began painting a vivid green skirt on a small wooden doll. 'Well, when I was small, I had a book of animal pictures given to me one Christmas. There was a big hairy ape in the middle, it scared me, and the present was utterly spoiled for months until once when I was all alone, I opened the book and

stared at the ape for about five minutes, and it was all washed away. I have often said to myself "There's that ape again—let me have a good look at it". She carefully wiped her brushes and laughed: 'And Kraspole is not quite a monkey-house.'

'No,' said Dasha gravely, 'it has boxes that open easily and have things painted inside.'

'Here, I have heard enough about apes and boxes.' Lev Kirillich flourished a crumpled sheet of paper. 'It bears I want you to think of this morning. For a cripples' home in Kalinin, and I want those bears to be good.'

'With raspberries and honey,' Dasha murmured, but neither of them heard her; she was given a bench by the window, some wood, and a specially bladed knife. Silence stole into the room. 'Miss' went on painting the doll. Lev Kirillich buried himself in the leaves of an ink-blotched ledger, and Dasha, her back to them both, began working.

The night's dreams and the morning's tumult had gone. She worked quietly, feeling neither pride nor pleasure in the movement of her hands. No enchanted gateways seemed to open. She was occupied with a piece of work, and her business was to carry it out as efficiently as she might. Soon she paused, wondering whether anything worth while could possibly be born of such a groovily patterned hour, but she dared not trust her own judgment, and she was afraid of anyone's appraisal of unfinished work. She went on. About an hour later she raised her head. 'Miss' had vanished. From his own bench Lev Kirillich was looking at her.

'How quiet you are,' and Dasha's cheeks flowered pink at his approval. 'Let me see. Why, it is a bear all right,' he sucked in his lips, and Dasha wanted to cry.

'I don't see it, I don't see it at all. It was all done in blindness,' she wished she might say, but he was saying, his eyes on the shaggy wooden animal: 'She thought you had it in you when she first saw you. I have known her for twenty years. She never misjudges people. She has known too many.'

'You mean "Miss"?'

He nodded.

'My mother says she has been in love with a Grand Duke or something, and the English king would not allow her to go back.'

'She has been in love with life,' he retorted, 'come tomorrow, lass.'

Alone, Lev Kirillich pondered over the gay little doll just painted by Miss Thompson. Her sense of colour was good, but it had taken her some time to get used to the sharp and exotic plethora familiar to a Russian. Lev Kirillich remembered her study of a sky for a children's book: it was all done in broad grey and pale blue washes, suggesting a day uncertain of its mood, and she said rather ruefully: 'Well, such are the skies I remember in England,' and whenever she mentioned England, Lev Kirillich felt both curious and lost. Her earlier background was an Arabic script to him. A quarrelling step-mother and a vaguely indifferent father might have belonged to any country, including his own, but the fairly spacious life in parsonage, with servants, good furniture, a carriage, meant that 'Miss' was a *blagorodnaya* a gentlewoman, and breadwinning should not have been necessary for her. 'It was my stepmother's money that gave us the carriage and paid the servants' wages,' explained Miss Thompson. 'I had but a meagre education, and what could I do except be a governess?' And Lev Kirillich, thinking of the big house and the carriage, looked incredulous. Yet she went to Russia, and at that point she became a kinswoman, all her remote alien beginnings ground to dust. 'My friends prophesied I would come back with diamonds and sables in my luggage,' laughed Miss Thompson, but Lev Kirillich preferred his own idea: 'Miss' went to Russia solely because she was a *boy-baba*, a rare woman, and her sense of adventure was heightened at the thought of going to a country as vast as it seemed mysterious.

She went to Serbino, Count Drosben's estate in Tambov Province. The family were of Baltic origin, rich, cold, exacting, and not remarkable except for their meanness. Miss Thompson wrote to a friend in England: 'If there are any *kotlety* left after dinner, they appear cold at supper, candles are measured by inches, and leaving

a book on the table instead of putting it back on the shelf is a minor catastrophe.' Yet, cold *kotlety* and measured candles notwithstanding, she stayed on, and learned to observe and absorb the generous Russian scene outside the grim stone gates of Serbino. *Tembovskaya Gubernia* was very much Russia, and she ended by loving it. Her pupils were two unintelligent but affectionate little girls. The count she barely saw. The countess remained frozenly polite, but Miss Thompson was treated with some consideration, paid a good salary, and given a surprisingly generous annual holiday. She never went to England: Russia lay before her, a huge and exciting book, and she longed to turn over more and more leaves. She chose the Caucasus, St. Petersburg, the Volga, the Crimca. One year she went to Kiev. At the theatre she met a young musician. It was all swift and foolish, splendid and terrifying. Miss Thompson came back to Serbino, looking as if she had seen a new heaven and a new earth, and the countess, probably remembering her own young hour, shed her glacial manner.

'We shall be sorry to lose you,' her yellow wooden face broke into something remotely resembling a smile, 'but, naturally, such things must happen to pretty girls. I trust your parents will approve of him.'

Miss Thompson chose to speak candidly:

'Well, my father might not like it. You see, he is not a Christian.'

The countess dropped her grey knitting. 'Not a Christian? How could that be?'

'He is a Jew . . .'

'A—Jew! But you can't do it. Not in our country. You have been with us for six years. You will bring disgrace on all of us. Don't you realise what you are doing? *Mein Gott!*' she tumbled into German, 'you can't do it in Russia. You are a gentlewoman. A Jew! Why, you could not even live where you wanted. You don't know our laws. He should have told you.'

'He has,' flashed Miss Thompson, 'it does not matter. I am not marrying a law. I am marrying a man I love,' and she added defiantly 'a man I have loved.'

That marked the falling of a curtain. She found her own way to Kiev only to learn that he had gone to Warsaw. He wrote asking her to stay on in Kiev and wait for him. He had important engagements with an orchestra, he had an idea for an opera, he felt he was a second Wagner because she loved him. Proud, content, at peace, Miss Thompson stayed on at Kiev. Then letters ceased. She steeled herself to be quiet. She wrote and wrote. Six weeks later she had a letter from an acquaintance of his: Yosef Radek had died of pneumonia at an infirmary in Warsaw. The letter said: 'He died quietly. The last thing we heard him say was: "the music she brought into my life I shall soon hear again".'

Miss Thompson knew she would never go back to England. She stayed on at Kiev until her child was born. It died within a week, but her heart had no room for another grief. Yet she would not refuse life. Her savings went, and she taught English in Kharkov, Odessa, Tiflis, Moscow, and St. Petersburg. In 1917, well over forty, tired and scamed in soul and body, she had her hair cut off, slipped into a soldier's uniform, and fought in the civil war. She met Lev Kirillich at the siege of Tzaritzin. She had half a pound of stale bread in her sack: he had not eaten for three days. She did not divide the half pound, and threatened to shoot him unless he finished the last crumb.

'Boy-baba—a rare woman,' he grunted. 'Life has put some stuff into you. What do you think of this nice little hell? When did you sleep last? When did you wash last?'

'Stop your chatter. Here is some *mahorka*. Smoke and go to sleep.'

They lost sight of each other, they met again further north in a vermin-ridden dug-out, and later kept in touch as much as tumbled conditions allowed. The civil war was over, the frenzied scene of guns, bayonets and entrenchments gave place to no less frenzied economical battles, but Miss Thompson's virtue was spent as suddenly as her zeal had broken out six years ago. The thorny and tormented years behind her claimed their own. She never quarrelled with facts. In the north few had heard of 'Tovarich Lena.' She

chose Kraspole for sanctuary, and Lev Kirillich left Orel, and came north. He found his barn of a home. She was allotted a small timbered cottage where the rooms stayed almost bare because she had no use for superfluous possessions. Tired, she continued cherishing her independence: she gave a few English lessons, and later painted toys for Lev Kirillich. Kraspole gossiped about her freely enough. No discussion of Miss Thompson could travel further than gossip: her earlier chronicle remained her own entirely.

'Of course, she is not a Russian,' mused old Barina, 'she is like a fish, does not like being kissed, and she never hurries to offer you tea; but somehow you feel warmer when you have seen her—and that is strange, considering what a cold woman she is.'

'She is a padlock with the key mislaid,' shrugged Anna Trofimovna, 'but I like to see her at my tea-table sometimes. She has such an appearance.'

Nil Ilyich commented contemptuously: 'There is no harm in her coming here, but she is quite unimportant. She must have been a mouse of a governess all her days.'

Alone Lev Kirillich had the freedom of the small cottage at the southern end of Dubovaya. Miss Thompson gave him tea, conversation when he needed it, and silence when he came tired. The small, frail woman and the clumsy, lame giant seemed odd companions, and normal circumstances might never have brought them together. Yet the years, which had first thrown them across each other, had so very little to do with the usual and the familiar. Friendship and even love would then flower out on no stronger foundation than a handshake in the dark, a shared cigarette, a word of gruff sympathy, any brief human gesture which then shone like a ruby placed on a sunlit window-sill, and the very suddenness of such relationships often enough led to their withering once all turmoil and fear withdrew from the door. But Miss Thompson and Lev Kirillich had learnt each other in a different way.

They had watched a new country come to its birth, and both had too much reverence for truth to surround the process with prettily

embroidered details. They remembered the land lying manacled by hatred, disruption, famine and other horrors which had no names in human language. They remembered days sheathed in thick yellow smoke, when the sun's dying suggested the ending of all things. They remembered fields of rye and wheat where some stray poppies or wilted cornflowers remained, shy and lonely, like some churchyard offering of the very poor, to grieve over the unspeakable aftermath of drawn-out carnage. They remembered nights made fearful by slowly ebbing moans of desperately wounded men, and women also, and by the even greater agony of dying horses. But they could also remember courage stripped of all tinsel bravado, that stark cold courage which gave wide room to fear, and knew no shame in admitting it. They had shirked neither blood nor sweat, though they had shed but few tears, and from that tiny fragile woman of alien beginnings Lev Kirillich, man and soldier that he was, unused to subtlety and bewildered by any depth in thought, learnt that it was possible to sit in a dim, cold corner, dispensing warmth and light to others.

They were glad of Dasha.

'That lass is worth any trouble, for all her strange talk. It is that home of hers I worry about.'

'No. 47 is nothing but an ephemeral incident, and she seems too real.'

'There you go again,' he grumbled. 'How can a house be an incident? Lena, how often do I have to tell you that I am a very dim-minded old fool?'

And she smiled and offered him more tea. It was a hot day, he looked tired, and she denied herself the pleasure of an argument.

chapter three

A VIOLIN TUNED UNDER A BROKEN ROOF

I

DASHENKA,' Anna Trofimovna said fussily, 'your tea is getting cold. And what can there be in a letter to fluster anyone?' She peered across the table. 'Why, it is such an ordinary envelope—it does not look important. Dashenka, is it from Moscow? Is it about a job?'

'It is from Frossia, mama.' The loving, warm letter in her hands, Dasha must needs speak patiently. 'Yes, she is in Moscow. They may be kept there for some time, but she does not explain why.'

'But what does she say?'

'Oh, the weather has been rough. And she went to see the new underground railway being built, and a picture exhibition.'

'What a letter!' Anna Trofimovna ate a spoonful of black-currant jam and wiped her mouth. 'The weather! And she is an educated woman. Even I could have put more into a letter. And fancy you letting your tea grow cold. . . .'

'Yes, *mamochka*.' Dasha hid the letter in her pocket, and forced herself to turn to the tepid tea and the brown-golden *bublik* on her plate. She said to herself that she must keep patient with so much love reaching out to her from Moscow. She smiled at her mother, stray phrases from the letter sending shafts of spring sunlight through her mind. 'I may have left suddenly—as you thought. I will explain later. I told Igor about your little bird. Don't imagine any thorns at Kraspole . . . Igor says he remembers you so well. "People like her would find beauty in a puddle of water . . ." *Radost moya*, don't feel lost in Dubovaya . . . It is nothing but a wayside inn. But write, write . . . Days here are tiny little boxes, packed to the top. Yet you gave me so much joy in Leningrad that

I can't cease feeling thankful for you . . . Never be bored with a grey week-day, Dasha: they can always be coloured . . .'

She was not bored—but restive. She now had the freedom of the orange-painted workshop; Lev Kirillich had been pleased with the small wooden bear, but Dasha felt it was too crude, she had not done what she had longed to do, but to Lev Kirillich, for all his gruff friendliness, she could not explain her desire so to carve a *mishka* that his passion for ripe raspberries and fresh honey could be evident to all who saw him. Lev Kirillich knew his craft, but he was neither counsellor nor critic.

The hours at the shop had to be stolen. At No. 47 Dasha must be secretive, and avoid searching questions and possible abuse. There she had her share of domestic toil which neither wearied nor satisfied her. Anna Trofimovna talked incessantly and managed to say very little. Nil Ilyich shone in his self-importance like an over-furnished brass samovar, and their dun-coloured visitors gathered at the well-laden table, and discussed the needs of their stomachs and the shortcomings of their neighbours.

To such gatherings Dasha never came. Disapproval notwithstanding, she had won a certain measure of freedom. 'She is wasting time indeed,' grumbled Nil Ilyich, 'always walking about or sitting at the Red Samovar. She says there is a job in Moscow. We shall see.' Anna Trofimovna fumbled for her handkerchief and kept silence. 'Something must happen.'

'Something will,' she whispered. 'It is early days yet, Nil Ilyich—'
'You will be saying that in a year's time.'

Anna Trofimovna said nothing.

Meanwhile Dasha was learning her Kraspole, reluctantly admitting that Frossia had been right, that the place could not be denied affection even though Dubovaya belonged to it. She said so to Kirill whom she met often enough. She never invited him to No. 47. They met in the street, or by the tumble-down gates of the old park, and when their pockets were not quite empty, they sat and drank endless glasses of tea at the Red Samovar. Sometimes he rushed past her, flinging over his shoulder 'I am much too busy

today.' Sometimes he halted and smiled such a lingering smile that Dasha imagined herself to be the most important person in Kraspol. The weather grew windier and colder, his thin frayed overcoat could not afford him much warmth, but Dasha had early learnt that even a remote hint at commiseration would have angered him. His talk jarred on her often enough, but an hour with him meant a heightened mood for the rest of the day.

He discussed everything. Out in the South an avalanche of facts had indeed been showered on Dasha from the platform, the teacher's desk, the wireless, and the wall newspaper, but Kirill, fiercely denouncing imagination and poetry, always succeeded to clothe his jerky sentences into something like stern beauty which came from his passionate conviction in his country's worth-while effort. At the Red Samovar girl clerks from the Food Trust stopped painting their lips, listened, and smiled. Even the waiters nodded approval. But Kirill was never aware of an audience. He talked with the same fire and vigour in the loneliest corner of the park.

'Take the first Five Year Plan . . . It was an iron age. Yes, we put steel and iron and coal into novel and poem and dance, but think of what was achieved. Yes, I allow that ugly things were done, compulsory collectivization and what not besides. All the same, nobody stood still. That was important.'

'Have some more apple jelly,' she invited, and he scowled.

'You do live in Dubovaya, don't you? You are almost a regressionist sometimes. I heard from Gleb yesterday. He is in Moscow. He wasted one whole morning at Tretiakovsky Gallery, some silly exhibition of Surikov's pictures—you would never know the name.' Dasha pretended she did, and he laughed. 'You are a poor liar . . . Well, Surikov painted straightforward historical themes, no sociological appeal in them at all, and Gleb says the place was packed.' Kirill would have spat violently but remembered the fine just in time. 'And that is not all. "Tovarish" is going out of fashion, we are all citizens now. We kiss women's hands again. We are urged not to dig our knives into mustard pots or help ourselves to

salt with our fingers. Tinned bureaucracy! Look at your own home! Your mother—'

Dasha's voice was dangerous. 'Leave her alone. She is past fifty. She has done more than her bit, worked in factories since she was a child, and now they say her heart is wrong.'

'I apologise. Yes, she is old. And there are far too many old people at Kraspole. They interfere with the rhythm of the place. You said yourself it was asleep.'

'And I was wrong . . . Yes, I know what I am saying. Even Nil Ilyich and old Barina. I dislike them. They bore me and I annoy them. I daresay they matter very little. But they are old, and they must have suffered in their own way.'

'Pure emotion,' Kirill got up. 'When Gleb is back, you come to the hostel and argue it out with him. I shall be late for my lecture. Now run back to No. 47 and have another dip in the stagnant waters.'

But the stagnant waters were disturbed most violently that day. It was Nil Ilyich's shirt that produced the explosion. Anna Trofimovna had it sent to the communal laundry, and it came back with a huge tear. Nil Ilyich rang up the laundry, and in a few seconds slammed the receiver down.

'To be told that a tear in a shirt does not justify my wasting their working time! I shall write to Leningrad, I shall send a letter to "Pravda". Today's meeting is so important, I am making a speech, and I can't go in a collar and tie, they are all *tovarichi* at the airplane factory, they would not like it, and how am I going to wear such a shirt?' he demanded, his glossy cheeks, his chin, his podgy hands all shaking with self-pity rather than fury. Anna Trofimovna wept into her handkerchief, but Dasha watched: shorn of all faked importance, Nil Ilyich seemed appealingly human and small and genuine. She might have understood his anger and been ready to despise him for it. His misery made him so defenceless that Dasha seized the shirt.

'I shall get it done in an hour,' she cried, but when she came back, she found Nil Ilyich alone, in a plum dressing-gown and slippers,

practising his absurd little speech in front of a mirror. His chest puffed out, and his eyes oily with the expectancy of a possible triumph.

'Well, well,' he said, 'how extraordinarily nice of you—' his stumpy fingers caressed the shirt, 'I said it is extraordinary on purpose because I know you don't like me at all. You are full of little secrecies, and you never listen to me. But I can't help liking you at times,' he sighed. 'Specially when you wear green. It goes so well with your hair, Dasha. Thank you, thank you. Some day if you are good, I might make you a present. You would like a pair of nice black suede gloves, for instance?' his voice was thick, and Dasha wondered if he had been drinking. But she looked at him hard and knew she was seeing a stranger. She tossed the shirt on the table, left the room, hurried into her coat and goloshes, and almost ran to the station.

All the way to Leningrad, all the way from Baltisky Station to Mariinsky Square, Dasha found refuge in one thought only: Frossia. Frossia must be back from Moscow, she had not written again, she may have had very urgent business there, but entrance examinations were now going on, so Kirill had told her, and Frossia could not keep away. Dasha would explain why—she could never come back to Kraspole, and Frossia would take the whole tangled knot into her hands and unravel it as she alone could do.

Dasha mounted the dim narrow staircase, rang the bell, knocked, but the red baize door stayed closed.

'How very silly of me,' she remarked, 'why, it is not one yet. Igor Vladimirovich must be at work and Frossia in college, and that is at Novaya Derevna. I must wait till the afternoon.' She came out, slightly disappointed, she had so wanted that hurting burden to slip off her shoulders at once, to be free again, quieted and reassured in a room with unstained walls and a clear view from the window, but she must wait.

She passed a red building which housed an offshoot of the archæological institute, walked in, and heard the end of a lecture

about some excavations near the banks of the Bug, and, faintly curious, looked at the model of a cargo boat which must have carried Ukrainian corn to Greece almost in pre-Seythian days. Then she wandered off to the small museum where roughly hewn stone *babas*, dug up from the steppes, at once attracted her. They were grey and heavy, almost formless and faceless, but they were hewn by a hand which must have known purpose as well as energy, and their very formlessness was deeply satisfying. Dasha spent an hour with the *babas* until the museum closed and she must come out again, and the sharp taloned claw of hurt and bewilderment was upon her once more. 'I must wait,' she kept repeating to herself, but the hours were shaped of lead. She sought the Alexander Gardens, she tried the quays and the little garden behind Galernaya Street, but even the running waters could offer her nothing that day. Somehow hunger came to her, and she had a meal in a small place in Galernaya Street, and sat at the tiny green-painted table, toying with a wooden salt-cellar, shaped like a frog, until she thought it was time to return to Mariinsky Square.

But nobody answered her. She began knocking, and the door of the opposite flat opened. A thin woman, wrapped in a huge grey and red shawl, came out and peered at her.

'The Titovs? Why, they are still in Moscow. She asked me to keep an eye on the flat. Are you a friend, perhaps?'

'Why, yes,' stammered Dasha and thought, 'she speaks roughly, but she may offer me a bed. I must stay somewhere.' And she said again, 'Yes, I am a friend of theirs, but Euphrosynia Pavlovna has not written for some time, and I wondered . . .'

'And could she write? Now one hospital, now another, and all to no good. Where is justice in the world? For two years nothing but anxiety, and to have to come to that, and Igor Vladimirovich is not an old man, and there is all her own work, and she never spares herself . . .' It was cold on the landing, and she hugged the grey shawl closer with an impatient little jerk. 'What a calamity! Some folk there are who never care for a cat, let alone a human being, and nothing ever hits them, and here you have those two,

kindness running out of them like corn from a torn sack, and such a thing to happen to them—'

'What has happened?' Dasha clenched at the railing.

'You said you were a friend,' the woman said brusquely, 'surely, you must have heard. His eyes . . . Too much reading, I think. And now he is blind. For two years they have been fighting it.'

Dasha's lips moved, she thanked the woman, groped her way downstairs, and found a tram to take her back to Baltisky Station and Kraspole. The late autumn day was burning in its fierce glory all about her, but she never saw it. Roofs were caught in gold and deep crimson, but she never looked at them. Even the ochre-coloured face of the station looked as unusual as if it were prepared for a festival, but she never observed it.

'For two years they have been fighting it . . .' Dasha went over the frequent loving letters, full of cheerful details about the city, their life and work, letters full of concern for and interest in her own little occupations, letters so deeply alive with joy at her cure. She went over them, she remembered them so sharply, and she could not find a single hint anywhere. She remembered her coming to Leningrad, all of Frossia again given to her, Dasha, her ambition, her plans, her future . . . 'And that evening when she wired me, she must have known what it meant, her being summoned to Moscow.'

She had not seen Frossia, but when the train came to Kraspole, Dasha walked along the platform, aware that a burden had been lifted indeed. She was back in a room, its walls unstained, and in such a room outbursts of temper and hot ugly-edged impatience were most sorry furniture.

She put it all into a letter as passionately repentant as it was clumsy in wording. But the heightened mood did not last, and there came a spell of rebellion, and even the stolen hours in the gaily

painted workshop seemed shorn of all earlier delight. She continued carving dolls and animals, but, when finished, they were just so many pieces of wood, and the torment of the unexpressed ate into her so that Kirill said:

'What is the matter? You would make a good poster for national failure.'

She would not answer.

'All right. Gleb is back. Will you come to the hostel tonight, I have told him something about you, but please bring a different face. And you must not mind eating sausage out of a newspaper—we don't run to table-cloths. There is no bell at the door. You come in and grope your way down the passage. Room 20 on your left.

'You seem too certain of my coming,' flashed Dasha, but he ran away.

Anna Trofimovna disapproved.

'University students! Pfui . . . They have not changed since the old days. They sleep in their day-clothes. If they have no chairs, they work lying on their beds. I have heard quite enough about that hostel, and nobody can do anything—they must have it their own way. Not even a cloth on the table, a dirty newspaper with a pickled herring in it! *Golubushka*, what is the sense of going there? Come to the concert hall. Nil Ilyich has got tickets. It is negro music, I hear, loud and nice.'

But Dasha refused the concert and went.

Old Barina brought a parcel of neatly darned pillow-cases. Anna Trofimovna praised the work lavishly and invited Barina to stay for tea.

'There is nobody to talk to,' she sighed, propping her chin with both hands, 'Nil Ilyich is hard at work, and he must have peace of an evening.'

'There is Dasha,' ventured Barina, her eyes scanning the wicker basket with pink and white mint gingerbread.

'Yes, there is Dasha. All the cares and sorrows I have had on her account! No wonder my hair has gone white! And now I can hardly get a civil word out of her.'

'Well, it is early days yet. You can't tell a flower from the seed. Perhaps they spoil her in the Crimea.'

'Yes, *golubushka*, you are right. That cure of hers—I ask you. I tried to do all I could, but I am an ignorant woman. They have knowledge, and what is there to boast about in their having done it? It was their duty. You don't take a child from its mother unless you mean to do your duty by her,' said Anna Trofimovna, easily forgetting all her feverish efforts to get Dasha accepted into the sanatorium. 'And they made her queer. She used not to be like that as a child. Why, the other day she went off to Leningrad—all in a fury just because Nil Ilyich had promised her a nice present. Yes, she slammed the door and went. I said to her "In the old days he would have taken the strap to you for your insolence and ingratitude" I said, "he stands in your father's shoes, and you always forget it," and she laughed as if we were in a circus. No feeling in her, *matushka*. She runs about with the students, Lev Kirillich and that Englishwoman, and her own flesh and blood might be in the next world for all she cares. Oh yes, she does work in the house all right, but you can tell her mind is in some strange place. Pfuil!' Anna Trofimovna attacked the fat pale-green teapot as though it were an enemy. 'These are funny days. There is work for everybody, food and fuel, and a good roof tree, what else could a Christian soul want? Nil Ilyich got her a job. Did she thank him? No. She says she has her own plans, and what they are, the wind may know—we don't.'

Barina hid a yawn. She was tired and wanted her tea, but she listened because of the wicker basket.

'Well, it is not only the students. She is great friends with Lev Kirillich. He is a kindly old man.'

'*Darmoyed*—always eaten other folks' bread,' snapped Anna Trofimovna, and at last remembered to offer the gingerbread.

Dasha had never been very far inside the park gates, and she almost wished she had not got to make her first visit in the twilight, with the pale massif of the great building a dim blur in the darkening wet world. The paths were ankle deep in sodden leaves, the gaunt

old trees seemed watchful and suspicious, and the sighing of wind among the bare branches sent a mournful rhythm through the shadows. She stumbled and all but fell once or twice, but, presently, the path curved sharply, the trees thinned out, and reassurance came back with the broad garland of flickering lights from the windows beyond. Gropingly, Dasha found the small door in the left wing, and went down the broad, ill-lit passage, something like zest for adventure mounting in her, so relieved was she to escape from the dun-tinted atmosphere of No. 47 if only for the sake of talk and stale sausage in soiled newspaper. She knocked and heard voices behind the door, but nobody answered her, and she must needs walk in uninvited.

The long high-ceilinged room appeared crowded. Tobacco smoke spiralled in the air, and the single oil lamp smelt and flickered. Under the lamp stood an enormous littered deal table. She took in the sausage and a tumble of books, and confusedly realised that the room held not a crowd but four men sprawling on narrow iron bedsteads, three of them strangers to her. She ignored them, and smiled at Kirill who leapt to his feet and stared at her.

'Why, is it really you?'

'You asked me,' Dasha said, suddenly sullen and withdrawn.

Two of the men, both bearded giants, who looked hewn out of mahogany, and wore oil-stained overalls, got up clumsily. The third, fair, slim, chiselled so delicately that his intimates looked all the bulkier, turned towards the door. In an instant, in spite of the smoke-dimmed light, Dasha caught at the details: a good head, clean hands, tidily brushed hair, shabby clothes . . . yet the pale face with its brooding brown eyes and stubborn lips looked so remote that she wondered whether he had seen her at all.

'Well, Gleb, I have told you about her,' said Kirill, and sank back on the tumbled bed. 'There is a hellish draught from the door,' he grumbled, and left Gleb to find a chair and make cursory introductions.

'Comrade Nikolai, Comrade Trofim, both from the airplane factory—'

'Twins,' added Nikolai, in a deep voice, 'and there it ends!'

They had looked alike at first, but now Dasha was in the room, and they were up, leaning against the wall and observing their huge muddy boots, and she noticed how different they were. Nikolai was mahogany and granite together. Body, voice, clothes and gestures, all were hard, huge, angular. Trofim, for all his height and girth, was soft red clay. His clothes hung in folds, his gestures curved, his voice had the springiness of wet moss.

'It was to be a party,' mumbled Kirill, 'and I had forgotten.'

'It is a party,' said Gleb, poured out some cold tea into a mug, and rummaged for cigarettes. The thin hand flashed under the lamp, and Dasha saw a deep scar running across from the little finger to the thumb. 'Have some sausage,' he invited, and Dasha, no longer sullen but excited, sat on a hard chair and drank cold tea which she detested.

'I am sorry about the lamp. It is the bad paraffin. We can't get any other. Are you coming here?'

'Here?' she stammered, her mouth full of very dry sausage.

'Yes, as a student,' he said so impatiently that she stopped eating, and Kirill's laughter startled her.

'Gleb, you are a fool. Why should she be a student? Why should she do anything? She is a miracle. Miracles don't have to work. They just stay—miracles.'

Dasha's checks burned, her hand shook so that she spilt some of the tea over an opened book. Unhurriedly Gleb wiped the page with a handkerchief.

'It takes hard work to achieve a miracle,' he murmured, 'and, Kirill, you had better find lodgings in some bear's den . . .'

'I apologise,' Kirill bowed towards Dasha. 'It was all in a manner of speaking. There is emptiness in certain words. A miracle is a beet-root grown from a rose-bush.'

'That is what you think—' Trofim began in a low, almost frightened voice when Nikolai hammered at him:

'Stop it, Troshka. I know that you were going to say that Kirill's soul is asleep. You have heard it snore, haven't you? Must

you shame me before a stranger? What is a soul? Is it made of paper or of gutta-percha? And what do I want with it? I have a mind to understand mathematics and I have two hands to use the machinery I need. I live in facts. A soul is no fact—just a fancy made of silver paper.'

'There is nothing mathematical in a sunset,' retorted Gleb, and Nikolai gestured so violently that Dasha could easily imagine a hammer in his hands.

'There is, except in those verses fools write when they are in love. There is sound astronomy for you—not just pictures—in a sunset.'

'Hear, hear!' Kirill clapped his hands.

Trofim said nothing. His bearded face looked gentle, and a small bird's egg would have come to no hurt in his clenched hands. Dasha wished he would speak and bring a calmer rhythm into the jagged and turmoiled discussion, but he sat so much apart from them all that it fell to her to bridge an awkward pause:

'Kirill said you taught literature . . .'

'Yes. One of my seminars is doing Goncharov this term. *Oblomov* mostly.'

Nikolai thundered again:

'There you are. *Oblomovchina*, sleep on the stove, do nothing all day and all life—why waste your pupils' time on remembering such nonsense? Ah, your books . . . Our factories should be our literature. We have a wall newspaper, we listen to technical lectures, to good music sometimes, and talks on big international questions. What room is there to waste on Goncharov? *Chort ego vozmi*, the devil take him! Words and words. Even in the dark old days they used to say "You can't make an overcoat out of words". He stopped and stared at Dasha. 'I am an uncouth man. I never wished you good health. I have been shouting too much.' He added clumsily: 'I have never seen such hair as yours. I reckon you could see it in the dark—'

'"Carrots" was my nickname once,' and Dasha asked for more tea. Gleb said there was none. He did not offer to make any more.

He sat there by the table, thin and tired, a candle put out by the wind. The scar on the right hand had gone whiter than the pale skin. Dasha thought he looked as though he had walked across one field after another, and now waited by a hedge for silence and sleep, yet as she glanced at him, she saw weariness slip off him as swiftly as it had come, and it encouraged her.

'I read "*Oblomov*" twice. It was like spending hours in a museum studying some old tapestry. In those days they used colours which can't fade.'

'You like words,' he rolled a cigarette so absently that wisps of greenish tobacco kept falling between his fingers. 'I am sorry, I can't talk tonight. I have lectured too much. I feel dried up, and I have been reading Tutchév also. You remember what he said "An uttered thought is a lie . . . Be silent . . . Hide your dreams."'

'You and your poetry,' laughed Kirill, 'and Tutchév has never echoed the national tradition. We can't help talking. We are mountain streams running on and on . . .'

'Mountain streams? Party men keep their tongue in their head,' thundered Nikolai, and Gleb leapt to his feet.

'Stop it. Such parrot talk is like a Tibetan prayer wheel. Yes, I know. A Russian respects no laws, and a party man is under strict discipline. A Russian is hesitant, tolerant, introspective, and always longs for the impossible, and a party man is just the opposite. And all of you forget there is human nature to tip the balance,' he was angry now, the pale face flushed, the hands were clenched, and the scar had turned dull purple. 'Yes, Nikolai, think of another pretty phrase: a Russian is easy and tolerant when he is not in a dionysiac frenzy—'

Dasha held her breath. Anna Trofimovna had been right, they were all talking so much that there was not anything for her to say, but she did not resent it. There was pleasure in watching them. They were magnetic in their different ways, they disconcerted her and, for all their swift interchange of crude personal abuse, they remained starkly impersonal where she was concerned. Kirill had greeted her with mockery, Nikolai made a clumsy compliment on

her hair, and there it ended. She sat in her best blue dress with white embroidery edging the throat and wrists, but she might have come in her shabbiest gingham or even a shift: they would not even have wondered if she felt cold. Sitting on the edge of a very dusty hard chair, Dasha knew that the evening was weaving an oddly coloured thread into her day's texture. She was not in that room at all, she sat in the train, and the scene, flashing past the window, changed so swiftly that nothing in her could gather separate details and work them into a completed pattern. The details, however, were exciting enough in themselves.

Now Gleb was shouting at Kirill:

'Yes, I did go to the Mostorg in Moscow. They call it a European emporium. I had no money even for a pair of cotton socks. And I fed at a students' canteen—*tschi* and *lapsha* every day for 38 kopeks, and I had just enough left for a glass of milk. Yes, all the "Gastronom" shops were crowded—conserves, jellies, jams, cakes, all at dizzy prices. Well, what does it prove? Those with pedestrian minds might say that 1917 was in vain because now it is possible to buy a piece of jellied salmon when those less fortunate must stay content with a pickled sprat? I say all of it proves nothing at all.'

'It proves what I have been saying all along,' Kirill shrieked, pulling at his beard, 'we are regressing for the sake of a few thin bourgeois props. Once we worshipped Marx and Engels consciously. In a few years' time we may be worshipping Peter the Great and Suvorov, and ideology will inevitably suffer. Look at any man in a tie—'

'So a tie can express ideology?'

'You are hedging, Gleb,' Kirill's sudden affectionate smile came as no surprise to Dasha. 'Your sense of poetry has corrupted you.'

'And your lack of historical sense has left you swamped in a bog.'

Dasha had no watch. Somewhere outside a consumptive clock wheezed the hour. She got up. Gleb said:

'I am going to see you across the park.'

'Bourgeois chivalry,' Kirill shouted, 'yes, offer her your arm, bow

nicely, kiss her hand when you leave her. Do it in style, you blasted little gentleman, and when you come back, my unwashed proletarian hands will make mincemeat of you.'

The others laughed. Dasha flushed angrily.

'I can find my own way,' in vain she hoped they would notice her small gesture of dignity, but that would have been ordinary, she realised, and in the strange room they had no leisure for observing everyday gestures. She watched Gleb throw a shabby overcoat across his shoulders.

She carried a torch. He did not offer his arm. At the gates he halted:

'You will be all right,' it was no question, and she did not reply, but he added:

'You have been silent. Little wonder. We do chatter, but that is our only way—words do release so much, and so much is pent up in us all.'

'So much of what?' Dasha ventured to wonder. Her torch caught the flicker of a sweeping gesture. His face she could not see clearly, but she guessed it to be tired, unsniling.

'Oh, scrambled eggs most of it—hesitation, assurance, nostalgia, energy, madness . . . Anything . . . Most of us are too strong to be quiet. Or, perhaps, too short-sighted. Scrambled eggs, I tell you. Mixing an orchid with a field daisy and not being able to tell one from the other—' abruptly, without wishing her good night, he turned and left her. But when she had vanished through the half-ruined gates, Gleb did not hurry back.

3

When he came back, the dim, untidy room was quiet. The twins had gone. Gleb stood in the doorway, his face raised as if he were listening. He could indeed hear silenced voices echoing all about him their stress, passion, anger, and swift childlike delight in argument. He had had a crowded, tiring day, seeing an incurably

idle student before he had even breakfasted, and filling all the hours with seminars and lectures, and now late in the evening, he had some work to do. He felt tired but not spent, as if all the energy he had poured out was now coming back to him, all its tissue enriched because of his earlier sharing. It had been a breathless day, he thought, recalling the brief hour at the canteen where six of them had discussed a theme for a thesis over dull cabbage soup and the usual noodles, '*lapsha*'. 'I must mend my boots,' he remembered, 'the weather is getting vile. But they can wait . . .'

'They went,' said Kirill unnecessarily, 'I wish they had not come. That niece without an uncle must have been bewildered. It was a motley party. Now Nikolai has run off to listen to a metallurgical lecture, and Trofim must be busy at prayer,' and he added crossly, 'why can't they leave each other alone? You heard that Nikolai was offered a good berth at Magnitostroi. Is he going? No! They build no churches in those new places, and Trofim would not go. Wax candle tomfoolery! Must they stay together and fight?'

'Trofim never fights,' Gleb said in a tired voice, 'he waits and lives. Mostly he waits. Something may come to him one day . . .'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know. But that girl from Dubovaya was interested in them. You could feel the tension in her.'

'Well, what do you think of her?'

'I am not thinking of her at all. I am reading "*Oblomov*". Please go on chewing your sunflower seeds. They may keep you quiet. We have had enough tumult for the night. And none the less,' Gleb threw back his head and laughed at the sooty walls, 'which of us could live without argument?'

He was not asking a question; his thin hands clasped the book, and his face was bent over the page. Kirill knew that if he were to leap off his bed and shout at someone standing by the door, Gleb would notice nothing. He would work in the canteen, in a crowded train carriage; he was once seen preparing a lecture at a table at the Red Samovar, sitting cheek by jowl with three chattering girl clerks. He carried such quiet within him, thought Kirill, that some-

how all the turmoil from without was silenced. It was the only way he could work, he said, otherwise a fly, crawling across the table, would have the power to interfere with his thoughts.

'Such detachment is surely a miracle,' thought Kirill, 'and he is never conscious of it. If someone were talking in this room, I could not even read cartoon captions in the *Crocodile*. I believe Trofim is the same. Yes, it was good for Dasha to meet them. I wish the boys had not gone so soon. Metallurgy and prayers . . . Pineapple eaten with salt—that is what their life is.'

But Kirill was wrong: the twins had gone home.

The twins came from Tambov, one of the Volga provinces. Their father kept a small shop, their mother had early run away 'to eat gingerbread' with a corn merchant, and they were brought up by a shaky toothless old woman with a wart on her chin and much gruff kindness in her heart. Their whole anchorage went in 1917 when they were in their early teens. Trofim had vague yearnings for a hut, a cow or two, a piece of arable land, but Nikolai's urge lay citywards. After some direly chequered years they found both work and refuge at Kraspole. The factory provided some kind of a roof-tree, but the twins' independence, as well as habits, rebelled against herding. Behind the station ran a lane, ending in a field, and at its end stood an apparently deserted hut. It looked like a box someone had opened in a hurry and left standing on its side. Its windows were stamped with an air of astonishment. But within were fairly stout timbered walls, a moderately sound roof, and an old brick oven which did not always smoke. The twins looked at the hut from a distance, liked it, and became its tenants, nobody questioning their choice. They christened the hut 'Tambov'. Somehow they acquired a bed, a table on three legs, and a long, shaky bench. Floor and window sills were used for cupboards. Two walls were Trofim's. Two others belonged to Nikolai, and were plastered with loudly coloured posters of workers, all orange-red flesh, raven-black hair, and an incredibly yellow background. Trofim's walls stayed bare except for a cheaply varnished ikon of Our Lady of

Vladimir. The huge brick oven offered a convenient ledge for an oil lamp.

They came back from the hostel in silence. The lamp smoked frenziedly, but 'Tambov' felt warm, quiet, closed-in, a place apart from any other habitation in Kraspole. Sometimes a cow could be heard behind the tiny garden they had made at the back of Tambov. Sometimes the wind veered, and they could catch the distant travail of a train about to leave. But the tumult of the factory never intruded there: it was three versts' walk for them every morning and afternoon.

Trofim got busy at the three-legged table, setting a bowl of *grecha* gruel and a wooden dish of pickled cucumbers. From the bench Nikolai watched him in silence. There was a smell of freshly shaved bark and oil-stained clothes. The raw autumn night was shut off by thick brown paper for curtains. From one smoke-tapestried wall a Union builder, axe in huge orange-magenta arms, stared at the impassive brown face of the Vladimir Lady. Nikolai lurched towards the table, seized a cucumber, and his eyes fell on that strangely remote face in the tawdry nickel frame.

'And whatever possessed you to start in that fashion in front of a stranger?' savagely he bit into the cucumber. 'You talk too much, Trofim. We both do. But why the black devil must you talk in riddles? What is God to begin with?'

'Here is the bread,' Trofim hacked at the glazed rye *karovai* and pushed a generous chunk towards Nikolai, 'but I never talked. You did. I am not clever. There are no words for God. I have none.'

'Yes, here is a riddle—a thing without words,' Nikolai crammed the bread into his mouth. Crumbs strayed all over his short matted beard, and some fell on the table. Nikolai always ate hungrily even when he felt no hunger, he feared that food might vanish unless he hurried over it.

Trofim chewed patiently, slowly. He broke his bread into small pieces, he cut his cucumber with the short-bladed knife; he ate so little of the *grecha* that almost the whole bowl went to Nikolai.

'No,' he spoke slowly, 'it is no riddle—nor a convenience, as you

said once. It is a great hindrance to be so dim and not have words—but I know of none about God and the soul, and it does not hamper me.'

'There are not any,' Nikolai, the food all eaten, wiped his mouth with the back of a hairy hand. 'Listen, I go to the factory, and I use my tools. I know what steel is. I feel it. I handle it. I see it. I know what different temperatures can do to it. But all your talk is just smoke climbing through a broken chimney.'

Trofim stacked the bowl and the dish together, rinsed them in a bucket of water, and put them into a corner.

'Leave the crocks. You can't see a spoon lying about but you must shove it somewhere else. Well, can't you answer?'

'How could I tell a starling why I have ten fingers? How could I tell that when your body dies, it goes quickly, a piece of soap thrown into hot water—the body only, Nikolai.'

'You said you had no words?' sneered Nikolai. 'The most cursed thing in the world is to love a fool.'

'Leave me to my foolishness. I leave you to yours. Let us have done with words, brother. You are always after more and more words as though they were stars in the sky. You need so few. Take prayer, sometimes words creep in, sometimes they disturb, and again they don't come at all, but prayer lives in you—words don't matter.'

'Listen, Abram Petrovich said to me you had been seen at your foolery in the coaling yard one evening. Trofim, I can't nurse you all your life. They did knock you down once, and I was there, and I made them pay for it. But I might not be there next time, and they might do something ugly to you, and you are my twin, curse you. Who has bewitched you into that rot? Batka's church was in his till, old Mavra had little use for anything except fairies in the wood, and that priest in the village was drunk most of the week. That was what we had,' shouted Nikolai, a thin cigarette paper in his fingers, but anger increased his clumsiness, the flimsy bit of paper went into a pulp, and he flung it on the floor. Trofim got another piece and rolled his cigarette.

'There was no bewitching. We were small. We knew hunger and cold and blows also. We were always together, and we wandered from *gubernia* to *gubernia*, tattered, covered with sores and frost-bites. Some people were kind to us. Others were not. Yet life was no stepmother—whatever happened, something sweet lay in it, and that sweetness could not come from a stomach aching for emptiness, or the lice crawling over us—'

'Life—sweet?'

'Well, you could not have found it sour, Nikolai, because you kept sticking to it.'

'You verminous fool—and how could I have dropped out when you were there?'

'You have answered yourself, brother—and you won't see it. I know I have always been a fool, I can't tell one end of a tool from the other, I can't follow those lectures, my mind is a sieve, brother, everything pouring out of it. But I took to thinking on my own—why was life sweet then with no sweetness to it? I reckoned that sweetness must have come from without, and that was Christ to me before I knew anything of Him.'

Then Nikolai swore. He did not swear briefly. He swore several oaths, as though they were so many handfuls of nuts, and he stood there, flinging them all over the room, always aiming at Trofim's wall and the quiet impassive brown face of a woman in her crude nickel frame. A sequence of oaths was hurled against that wall, all vile mud-begotten words Nikolai had learnt through the dark and evil years of their vagabondage, words which carried the leprosy of twisted thought in them, words which smelt of sulphur and sewers, and Nikolai went on swearing until all breath failed him, and he sank back on the bench, his brooding eyes fierce under the matted eyebrows.

'Must you put that poison into me, *chortov syn*, son of Satan?'

But Trofim went out, came back with the bucket refilled with cold water, and thrust it into the mouth of the oven.

'It will soon be hot,' he said, on his knees before the oven.

'It is not rest-day tomorrow. What should I want with a bath?'

'It is not for a bath, brother, *bratetz*. There are four dirty shirts. They should have been washed last week. You brought them to my mind.'

'I want to get quiet and sleep. You and your poison! You are so damn slow, you will be washing the shirts till dawn. I want the lamp put out, I want to sleep.'

'We will do them together,' Trofim pulled a huge grey enamelled basin from a corner. 'You are a poor laundry hand, you will have to think about the work, and your anger may come back, but you will be too busy with the shirts, your mind won't have room for anger, it will go away, and you will be clean.'

'Me? You mean the shirts?'

'I mean you. Anger soils so much.'

Nikolai washed the shirts all caked with dirt and sweat. He did it clumsily, soap suds all over his overalls. He did it in silence. His own hands in the greasy water, Trofim bent low over the chipped basin. He wished he had fine clear words in him so that he might explain to Nikolai what it was that came and held him, Trofim, so closely in its starlit certainty, so closely and so warmly that nothing said or done by friend or enemy could interfere with it. But he never had words, he thought, and he had so little understanding.

The shirts were washed and hung up. Trofim opened the tiny oven door, and, with the lamp blown out, the floor of Tambov lay covered by a roseate-red counterpane. He lay on his side of the bed and closed his eyes. Presently he heard Nikolai pant, as he pulled off his heavy boots.

'Asleep?'

Trofim did not answer.

'*Vshiiviy dourak*, you vermin-ridden fool, why can't I blast you to hell?' muttered Nikolai, and stretched himself on the bed, his left arm flung round Trofim's neck.

4

In a poorly furnished room of a Moscow hotel Frossia stood by the window, Dasha's letter in her hand. She had read it often, and now she knew that some of its phrases were so graven in her mind that no imagined misunderstanding or even splintered intimacy would ever erase them. 'I have not deserved it,' thought Frossia, 'I could not have blamed her if she had taken my reticence in any other spirit, believing me to have turned the key where a door might have stayed open.'

'I have heard about Igor Vladimirovich,' wrote Dasha, 'and about your last two years. I went to Leningrad, feeling like a camel, its back broken by a breath of wind, but you know that an imagined burden is all the more unbearable because there is no limit to its weight, and when I heard about your grief, it all went. I know why you would not tell me . . . They talk so much about art for art's sake, but love for its own sake is so much rarer. I am so clumsy, I can't put it all the way I want to . . . but you seem to stand in a room, its walls unstained, and a great reach of forest can be seen from the window, and I am there with you because you put me there, I am there for the moment, that is, but there are moments which are worth more than whole grey years. I feel too small and useless to offer you pity . . . No, what I mean is that pity would be too small and useless. I think that God will somehow give you both light through a thickly shuttered window. Forgive me for writing all this. I felt I had to . . .'

'Dashenka,' thought Frossia, 'I do know you live in moments, leaping from light to dark and back again, but thank you for having told me of such a moment.'

Those two years . . . For all her poise and strength, she could not think clearly about them. There had been hospitals and consulting rooms, much fussiness and more kindness, and always efficiency of the cool, tabulated kind. There had been wakeful nights, tenanted by her fear that Igor, who had always lived for people and with people, could never face that inevitable dole of

loneliness. And yet when all was over, she realised that comfort could be gathered from the very dying of hopes. Those had been so pallid and meagre in their substance, though she clung to them stubbornly, reluctant to admit that her very clinging sometimes shredded her energy.

That first evening when no shadows fell for Igor, his stone-hewn reserve of years broke down as if it were a piece of crumbled masonry. He sat up in bed and screamed, and sank back, weak and shamed by his weakness. For the first time Frossia used words which wounded them both.

'We are not at home, Igor. We are in a hotel in Moscow. The floor supervisor might think you have gone out of your mind,' and, having said it, she was frightened, knowing she had put on clothing which would never fit her, and at once wrenched herself free from the cumbrous, smothering folds. She never whispered 'I am sorry': such words, cheapened by shallow use, would have but stressed the hurt of the earlier phrase. She went up to the bed, and held his thin rough hands as if within them alone lay her soul's salvation, and the touch brought him out of his fear. She waited, her fingers quiet and strong in his, she waited silently until she knew that stillness was again coming back to him. Then she told him odd things about the room—'always those net curtains which are neither yellow nor white. They must dip them in coffee, I think. But there is a picture of a monkey eating nuts, just above the dressing-chest. It is old and fly-blown, but it is good, it is a tame monkey, sitting in a room, and you feel that nuts are about his only pleasure in life. And a woman is hurrying round the corner to Strelezky Boulevard, a green parrot in a wicker cage. She should have covered the cage—it is much too cold for a parrot. And a boy has just spilt a load of apples on the pavement. People are helping him to pick them up. They are such large apples—the colour of unripened rye—' Frossia went on painting little street scenes for him. She was not being patient. Patience would have been so cheap a currency for her to use. She knew that all of her was being gathered up into a thirst so to minister to him and to people and colour his world, that all her eyes saw would become his.

Once he said:

'Your mind has been such a lamp to me all these years. It is more than that now. Why, I can see the furniture in this room, and I know the kind of a day Moscow has had—all pale grey and blue, with the winter trying to get in. As to your face, is there any need for me to look at it?' he added in a lower key. 'Blindness can't take thought away, *lubimaya moyá*, my beloved. I had been afraid of it, and it has gone,' and from his calm Frossia must now borrow, and move through the inevitably crowded days as peaceably as she knew he wished her to.

Her work was temporarily transferred to Moscow, and Igor was learning carpentry. They moved to a tiny furnished flat in Arbat close to the huge building where morning by morning he grappled with the hard business of being blind. Later, in the flat, he waited for the hour when he could hear steps down the street. Then a light would spread over his face, and nobody could then have imagined him blind: he saw Frossia with his hearing.

'And here you sit doing nothing,' she cried, running in, 'I came in so quietly, I did not want to disturb you. I know I am late—there was a queue at the Gastronom in Gorky Street. I rather wanted an amusing meal tonight,' she threw a tumble of parcels on the table. 'Liver sausage and mushroom patties, and don't breathe a word about extravagance—a piece of *balyk* and some apple *pastila*. You must not scold, Igor. I am feeling lazy, and it is an occasion—we are going to Kraspolc so soon, and I am glad of it, and I want Dasha for myself, and quiet for you—I am sure it is wise—Leningrad can be so hot and noisy. So it is an occasion . . .' She was busy at the table, unwrapping the packages. 'I have loved Moscow, but I suppose it is the foreign blood in me, I can't accept her, all so old and staid and carven on one side, and so modern, breathless and swift on the other. And I have bought "Pravda". Semen Platonych said you would be interested in an article. Something about arctic railways.'

'Did Zerbov write it?'

'Why, yes.'

'Then it will be good. Frossia, it is queer—Zerbov was just a miserable little waif in 1919. I don't know why he did not die then, and today he is one of our best engineers.'

'Because he met you in 1919,' retorted Frossia, slicing the sausage. 'Igor, you are hopeless. How many more Zerbovs haven't you met and helped? You never mention them except in a casual way.'

'It was all casual, and there were many more people who cursed when they met me.'

'Yes, when you would not approve their faked travel permits. But you were never unkind to them.'

'They thought I was. You thought so too. When you wanted to run away from that first college where you taught French letters to half-illiterate peasants, and they laughed at you. And when you got impatient with people because they looked weary or talked too much about food. I was unkind then. I had to be. Kindness would have made you stumble. I should have hated you to stumble.'

'But I did, so often,' she said, her eyes far away from the ordinary room with its drab lace curtains and the green plush-covered table, but Igor must have his 'Pravda' article, and Frossia closed the door upon that very humble house in Leningrad where she had once heard him say 'faith and hope should never be straitly housed . . .'

The article was long. When she had finished, he said:

'I think I am tired. It is stupid. You must forgive me.'

She knew he was not. He said it so often because of his fear lest he were to invade her spare time too much and deny her the empty room where she might think and be alone, and she never hurt him by saying that in the empty room her thoughts were always with him, but tonight, she felt, was a specially graven occasion. The pure winter day had gladdened her, her work had heartened her, but something else was interwoven with the shining snow and the sharp pleasure in her students' successful examination.

'How silly of me,' she cried, 'I had a long letter from Dasha. I have not read it yet. We shall read it together. I am sorry, Igor—'

you won't mind? It will be good when we are at Kraspole. That home of hers makes me almost anxious. How could there be such people today? They wallow in smugness. No, I must be charitable. Anna Trofimovna has known her bitter days, much might be forgiven her, but that man is just an overfed frog.'

'And will you have a garden without weeds? But where is the letter?'

The opening lines bewildered Frossia:

'She is quoting Kolzov, his poem on the cornflowers,' she said rather helplessly; 'what has happened to her? She says "they are all urging me to read more and more." But who are "they"?''

'She may have put the engine behind the last coach—'

Frossia read:

'I have not been lazy . . . I have been to several public lectures, and I have learnt so much. Did you know that there are 185 different peoples in the Union? And some among them were quite unknown before, and now they have their own culture and literature—Gilyaks, Yakuzy, Kunands, and others. It all makes me feel I am working at an enormous quilt. It is so exciting. Years ago you said in a letter—"there are people who look at apple-blossom, and think it so beautiful that they cut it off just for ornament, and later weep for the fruit they might have had . . ." But I mean to have the fruit as well. I have seen the film of the new metro now being built in Moscow. Nikolai took me, it was far too technical, but I did not tell him so. I also went to a talk given by an old engineer who looked as if he had wept all night, and said that predatory desert was far more terrifying than any war (Gleb says he is wrong: nothing could be worse than war), and he tried to prove that the desert was already encroaching on Western Siberia. I felt frightened, but Gleb said scientists were often wrong: they had their facts, but no vision, and Kirill quarrelled with him. They all argue with one another, but that is quite usual. I am reading much: Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy, and Kirill gets angry: he is against all classics which is funny but understandable, so Gleb says. Kirill gets angry about so many things: he says we are in

danger of making a fetish of family life because divorce is so much more difficult and expensive than it used to be . . .’

‘Who are all those people?’ asked Igor.

‘I don’t know,’ Frossia turned a page:

‘You ask me about my home life. Frossia, I try not to be bitter and small, but No. 47 could never be a home. My mother is not unkind, but I know I puzzle her. Nil Ilyich is dreadful. I will not take his presents, and whenever I see him, I feel I am ready to lie and grumble and lose my temper. Old Barina and a few others are kindly enough, but they are always ready to pity me because I am not strong; that angers me, and I do unkind things. Yesterday I sprinkled salt and pepper into Barina’s blackberry *kissel*. She looked unhappy but did not complain. Miss Thompson is different, she is a nicely opened box, and I love her and Lev Kirillich. I spend two hours in his workshop every morning. He says my work is good, but I know it can’t be: things just remain wooden. There is also Valia, a hunchback, who lives with Barina. She is odd and rather frightening like a shadow you can’t explain: she has a kind face, and smiles when saying really unkind things, and I can’t make her out . . . Please, Frossia, come to Kraspole soon, and bow for me to Igor Vladimirovich,’ and the letter ended with a postscript, ‘I have not heard from Olga Petrovna, and I feel I must go to Leningrad and learn to make wooden things unwooden, but I shall wait till you come.’

‘You spoke of Zerbov,’ said Igor. ‘I met him once, twice, perhaps six times in all . . . I never wrote him letters. I never kept him in my mind. I never spent care on him. Dasha is something you yourself have made . . .’

‘Dasha,’ retorted Frossia, ‘has never belonged to anyone but herself.’

5

The grey stove in the orange-painted room was well stoked with pine logs. The place was warm and fragrant. The window-panes, with their delicate icy traceries, gleamed, so many beryls and

amethysts, in the January sun. But Miss Thompson shivered, gathered up her work, and moved nearer the stove.

'I am getting old,' she grumbled, 'it may be a hard winter, but I have known harder, and the frost seems to have stuck into my bones,' she wore a thick grey shawl over a white woollen shirt, her feet were in fur-edged slippers, but she looked small and shrivelled in the bright sunlight.'

'Well, the frost is hard enough to crack a pine,' said Lev Kirillich. 'Old? Rubbish! You are not old, Lena. Your body may be, but why worry? Your body and mine got old twenty years ago. And bones don't matter so much. Have some tea,' he coaxed her, 'and look at the window—heavenly Jerusalem is not in it.'

'Ice, however coloured, is not my idea of heavenly Jerusalem.'

He sighed, ambled off to make the tea, and presently brought her a steaming glass together with a plate of *bubliki* heavily sprinkled with caraway seeds.

'Don't look at the window then. Drink your tea and finish painting the cossack's coat. I am glad you chose crimson for it. Toys must have leaping colour in them.'

'And workshops, too,' Miss Thompson, heartened by praise as well as by tea, smiled at the walls. 'Oh Levushka, you are a child with paint. Do you remember that evening outside Kharkov when the sky was burning, so many colours that you could not count them, and they changed so swiftly, and you said "that is the kind of room I want to live in some day"?''

'The stories you tell,' he grumbled, but she saw that he was pleased by the way he ruffled his hair, and asked:

'Where is Dasha?'

'She is not coming today. There is a lecture of Lopary art somewhere. She worked here last night and finished the Circassian doll, and was not pleased with it.' Lev Kirillich tugged at his huge beard, 'I can always tell by her eyes, they look hurt when she is disappointed, and yet I keep telling her that the work is clean and good and true. What more can one want?'

Miss Thompson, tea and *bubliki* finished, turned to her brushes

again. She laid a careful streak of crimson across the pale wooden coat of the small cossack, and murmured:

'I shall give him a wild sky-blue *papakha*—it will look well on his shaggy head. Dasha—disappointed, you said? And so she should be. I would weep if she were ever content with her work.'

'Now, Lena, you may feel the cold today, I know it makes you all knotted up and miserable—but why talk in riddles?'

'I was not. That child is not like you and me, Levushka. You and I have learnt a craft moderately well, and we go on making small and humble things, and that keeps the bread on the table, and we are satisfied. Dasha will never be a craftswoman. She is an artist, and there is a curse mixed with that blessing. Artists, Levushka, never rub their hands over their work. Sometimes they would like to destroy it because they feel that they had tried to reach a star and grasped dust instead. How do I know?' Miss Thompson pulled the heavy shawl closer to her shoulders. 'Goodness, I could not tell you. I just know it as much as I know that my bones are aching with the cold. But it is early days yet. Gone to a lecture on Lopary art? She is like a sponge, but I am thankful she has found friends among those young people.'

'Her people don't like it. Anna Trofimovna won't say a civil word to me.'

'Ah well,' Miss Thompson paused to dip her brush, 'don't be too hard on the woman: she had expected a daisy, and got a hothouse orchid instead, and doesn't really know that except that her daisy is not there.'

After that first visit Dasha wondered if she would ever go to the hostel again; the evening had born its own excitement, then it died, and she decided that they had all been too casual, Gleb's abruptly varied moods almost bordering on rudeness. 'Besides, they might not want me. They are all so busy.' But once she met Nikolai hurrying down the street, his huge head bare, a short sheepskin coat over his shabby overalls. He halted and smiled, and suddenly Dasha realised that he looked like Trofim in his eagerness.

'I—I have not seen you—for so long,' he faltered, 'and there is a film on of the Moscow metro at the club tonight,' and she accepted. The club hall was dirty and crowded, the film excellent but technical, she was lost in that world of machinery, its precision and purpose meant nothing to her, and Nikolai's conversation, which had rippled so freely at the hostel, now dwindled down to a few barely audible remarks. The film was about to end when Dasha realised that, having met Gleb, she knew very little more about him than she had known before. 'Wait till you have seen him,' Kirill had said, and now, having seen him, she could think of the wind over steppes, or a northern twilight over a fir coppice, or the pale grey-green rye fields in the spring, but such pictures were not substantial enough to paint a background to satisfy her, she thought, idly watching the steel spiral, whirl, and twist into various patterns. At last it was over, and she thanked Nikolai.

'I must go home.'

There was a canteen behind the hall, a crowded world of men and women, little tables, much smoke, talk, and jingle of glasses, and Nikolai suggested cocoa, but she refused.

'Then it is Tambov for me,' he said a little ruefully. 'Our home, you know.'

'Why not go to No. 20,' she smiled, 'they will be glad of you. By the way, did Kirill and Gleb grow up together?'

'Together? Didn't you know? Gleb was a vagrant—yes, a *bezprisorny* in 1917, a small mite he was then, six or seven, I suppose. They called them "children of the Terror", didn't they? Later he was sent to some school or other in Leningrad, and there you are—'

'A vagrant—a *bezprisorny*.'

Dasha had heard of them. Years ago she had seen them in the Crimea. Yet for most, such medical and mental attention as crossed their path, came too late. They were rescued—having already lost all hold on life. They had seen things no child should have been allowed to hear of. For some years famine had refused to kill them, nor would frost work its terrible will on their bodies. They died to all semblance of human life, and went on living, at least, a great

many of them did, and when they were rescued, they died, bewildered, hurt, and tired beyond complaint and speech. In the Crimea they died in warm clean beds, thousands of their small brothers and sisters having died in gutters, cemetery vaults, and under ruined houses, in Leningrad, Moscow, and other cities. In the Crimean hospitals they died in unfamiliar warmth, clean nightclothes over their terribly scarred little bodies, but they died just the same.

'Gleb—a vagrant,' Dasha shivered, 'and yet he lived.'

'More than that. He talks nonsense, he is moody, you can't depend on him for a stale loaf, but he has proved himself. He would have made a good soldier. He has the discipline in him, he drives his students so hard you would think they might lodge complaints with the Faculty Committee, but they love him. I laugh at his work. I am a man of machines, words mean little to me. I quarrel with him, his talk is like a needle sometimes, but he is a brother to me.'

'A vagrant,' murmured Dasha, and wished she might ask Nikolai about Gleb's scar, and knew that she must wait for Gleb himself to tell her.

The years before 1917 were erased from Gleb's memory. No familiar street, house, or even picture, no beloved face, voice, or hand, were remembered by him. His small sentient life seemed to have opened in an underground world of darkness, hunger, bitter cold alternating with heavy heat, dirt and darkness again, inarticulacy which never hampered him—so few and bestial were his needs—and was all the more terrible to remember, unspeakably vile habits, largely borrowed from the flotsam of verminous, evil-mouthed companions like himself, robbed by the national upheaval of all their beginnings, anchorage, and claim to social attention. With such a gang Gleb wandered from city to city, finding temporary sanctuary in cemetery vaults, charred ruins of houses, and, sometimes, sewers. Darkness seemed to have begotten them; darkness now mothered them. Daylight stood for danger, and human beings were enemies. By night only could they creep out, scrounge or steal the wherewithal to sustain their bodies for further

dreary wanderings from one dark pit to another. With such a gang, Gleb continued his vagabondage for about five years until a school, started by the inimitable Kollontai, gathered them in, worked on their verminous bodies and no less dirty minds, and worked on and on until most of the vagrants became children, scars on their souls and bodies, but children none the less, no longer startled by the breaking dawn or frightened by the sound of a human voice.

The process took years, and when Gleb was released from that school, he came to realise his need for literature by way of his earlier dumbness which, when vanished, stirred in him a ravaging hunger for more and more articulacy. His teachers approved his choice. When the time came, Gleb was sent to the Moscow university there to study for his degree.

It all happened in another age, in another world, to a self of his which had worn clothing he found difficult to recognise in his sober moments. Now he was fully fledged, his worth recognised, and his work approved. Now he was Gleb Petrovich Krylov, whose judgment was occasionally sought by older scholars, Gleb Petrovich, to whom the richly lettered scroll of Russian literature was a familiar chronicle, who had lectured in Leningrad and Moscow, who did his normal tutor's work with such a passionate energy that the most indolent students grumbled and said: 'Well, you just can't laze under Krylov. He loves the damn thing so much there must be something worthwhile in it—' and they did their work.

Yet there still returned thornily edged spells when even his beloved books became inimical, when furniture screamed and mocked at him, and he knew himself flung back into the dark terror his childhood had been. Gleb never forgot it, but ordinarily he lived with it much as some people might find it possible to live in an ugly house, among poor pictures and unlovely wallpaper simply because the house and the furniture had always been there. But there broke occasions (Kirill knew of them by experience) when all the remembered dreadfulness lost its dim remoteness, thrust itself within his gates, and Gleb ceased to be a grown man.

his mind so richly and neatly furnished, and turned back to being a waif, a raw bleeding lump of unwanted and unclaimed evil-smelling flesh, his fingernails grimy talons, sores over his face and behind his ears, his tatters caked with dirt and excrement. He was such a lump, unfit to live under a roof, unworthy of the least and crudest attention from his kind.

Such spells came when he was in Moscow. He locked the door, sat on the unmade bed, drank water in large and noisy gulps, and, with the shred of sanity left to him, schooled to keep himself from the window because his room was on the third floor.

The darkly coloured dementia might last an hour, a day, or even longer. Once he ventured out, and brought in a stranger, a girl, to share his Gethsemane with him. She was a poorly clad thin body with greedy pale-blue eyes and a foolish moist mouth. She said little, sat on the tumbled bed, drank his beer, salting it in the students' fashion, smoked endless cigarettes, then yawned, and lay on the bed, waiting. But his horror she could not share. His first muddled phrases made her forget both town clothes and town manners, and stare at him, her crudely painted mouth wide open in the peasant way.

'What are you talking about? Who is going to sleep with his sister? I am not your own sister. Don't you want me to stay the night? I wish you would stop pacing up and down. I tell you I am really free—my friend has gone to Vladivostok,' she ended lamely because she had no friend at all.

Gleb turned her out with an oath which filled her with admiration and surprise. None the less, she demanded money before going. He flung it at her, all he had in the room, the pitifully slender wherewithal for a week's meagre meals. He laughed, watching her stoop over the scattered coins. The laughter brought him out of the dark spell, and he blessed the hurry with which she ran away.

'A vagrant,' thought Dasha.

They were eating in the warm, over-furnished parlour of No. 47. The thick curtains were drawn. The tablecloth shone coldly white

under the lamplight. The clear soup had large fat golden *kloetzki* floating in it. 'All made with good wheaten flour and eggs,' said Anna Trofimovna, 'Nina Andreevna said the *kloetzki* they give you in the communal kitchen are not fit for the gutter. Mean with eggs they are, and they put in colouring, the devils . . .'

'Yes, nice fat *kloetzki* . . .' thought Dasha, 'it is all comfortable and warm and as stifling as a quilt over your mouth,' and, in spite of her hunger, she refused a second helping. 'I must go there tonight. They might laugh. Kirill will. Gleb might never notice me. But I shall go and get rid of that terrible haunting word. It is a rattling bare bone of a word,' she said to herself, watching her mother serve dark brown *kotlety* made of fresh pork.

Somehow the meal ended and somehow Dasha found herself entering Room 20. Kirill was lying on his bed. He turned his head lazily and gave her no smile. At the table, under the smoking lamp, Gleb sat, reading aloud Ehrenburg's 'Children'. Dasha halted in the doorway.

'He is reading his life-story. It is like seeing a window open. I must look in . . .'

she thought.

Gleb looked up.

'Oh, come in. But it will be very quiet tonight. I had begun Ehrenburg in an odd mood,' he smiled wryly, 'I had better read it to you by way of introducing myself, and, please, spare me questions.'

Kirill shrugged. Dasha sat down, her hands cold in the tiny *karakul* muff. Gleb read:

'Lord, in these terrible days
Who would venture to pray for themselves?
We have sinned. Let Thy wrath
Come and smite us.
But spare the children, Lord,
The children who are full of fears,
And keep together;
By daytime their voices are shrill
As they play war-games in the street;

The children who sell newspapers, .
Shouting the dreadful news,
And wondering why we draw back
From the look in their eyes.
The children who hide their plush bears
For safety under their pillows;
Who wait for their father's footsteps,
And ask "when will he come?"
All, all the children, Lord . . .
Without them life is nothing,
And death creeps at the door . . .
If their laughter were to die,
We would forget the singing of brooks,
The rustling of leaves,
And the sound of Thy voice . . .
If we could not see their eyes,
We might forget the splendour of stars in the dark,
And the dying of stars at dawn,
We would forget Thy own eyes, Lord.
Spare then the children, our only solace,
They are the ladder
For sinners to come to Thy heaven . . .'

Gleb finished, his voice ringing low as if a curtain were coming down. Dasha did not move. Kirill said heavily:

'Well, I have heard it before. Niece without an uncle, have some tea. Hospitality is always here—even for uninvited guests.'

She refused silently. She wished Kirill had not spoken. For her the bleak room still housed some of the pure chiselled quality of the poem. She knew it well, but never before had she heard it read in such a way—with warmth and feeling, the absence of bitterness enhancing the desolation of the lines. She could say nothing; she merely waited, the collar of her winter coat unbuttoned, her head, in its absurd grey astrakan cap, tilted back as if she were still listening.

'Evoke Murillo from the dead. *He* might deal with you,' Kirill.

said acidly, 'except for your cap. Well, you don't want tea, and you don't sound very talkative. I have had a tiring day. Thank you,' he turned to the wall, and suddenly Dasha laughed.

'Plush teddy-bear—who needs a good combing.'

From the wall came a groan: 'Must I go on being rude to you?'

'Stop it,' Gleb interfered, 'I want to talk to her. Nikolai says he told you about me. Well, I was such a child. I had no teddy-bears to hug under the pillow. In bare truth I had no pillow till I got to the place misnamed the house of correction. The pillows were hard, there were no toys to hug for comfort, but none of us would have known what to do with a toy.' Gleb was looking at the littered table, and Dasha had a feeling he was speaking from a distance. 'Does it hurt him to talk?' she wondered, and dared not interrupt, and he went on, his thin fingers idle over an open book, the long scar coldly white under the lamplight:

'Yes, we were called children of the Terror, all of us, boys and girls between twelve and eighteen who might not have found hell an unfamiliar country. There was at least one who had committed murder. There may have been others. In 1918, I think,—I was too small and dark-minded to register dates then—there was a huge mound of snow by Narva Gate. Spring came, and the snow melted. There was not so much of it after all. There were fifteen frozen little bodies underneath. Well, I had had about five years of that vagabondage, and then we were rounded up by the Cheka, and some cursed their luck—those who could speak at all, but some had forgotten how to talk, and none remembered their antecedents. I can't say any of us liked being rounded up: we had hunted in gangs for too long a time. However, at the school some women took us up. They had no inhibitions. They knew they were facing the worst human material, and they just started to tackle it. My own gang had a murderer, and some had done incest, and boasted of it. And we were ignorant. We could not even be made to understand why two and two made four. Those women taught us counting with coloured balls on wires. They also taught us the alphabet, and boys and girls past sixteen took months to master it. Others refused to

learn. Those women stayed patient. An earthquake would not have shaken their patience. There was a boy of about fifteen. Asked if he could read, he just grinned "I had no time to waste, but I once spent a night with five women, and it is more than any of you have done." His laughter was slime. But the women stayed patient. They worked on him. He was older than I am. Now he is a mining engineer somewhere in the Urals.'

Suddenly he stopped and smiled at Dasha:

'What is the matter? There is nothing to wonder at except the patience of those women. They had a strange sense of rightness in them. They worked no miracles. None of us turned good overnight. We went on lying and stealing and behaving in a disgusting way, yet something went on happening every day of those six years,' and Gleb repeated, 'No, they worked no miracles. You could not even say that they were kind. Kindness alone would not have reached so far. Well, I don't know,' he stopped and tossed back his pale head as if ready to throw a challenge, 'I can only think they saw that in us which God once saw in Adam, though they taught us no religion.'

'And all made good?' Dasha asked in a small voice.

'No,' he got up abruptly, 'some did not. But they went to the dogs by a different way,' he stooped over some papers. 'Lord, I am late for the seminar,' he snatched a stack of bethumbed notes and vanished.

Kirill turned in bed and said:

'Don't look tormented. I know it does not hurt him to talk,' Dasha had never expected such comfort from him, and she did not resent the fiercely flung afterthought. 'Young lady of leisure, I may appear idle, but I have thirty papers to correct—'

It was snowing when Dasha came out. She stood for an instant on the edge of the path, and felt her cheek. 'Of course, it is just snow,' she said almost angrily, and wiped her eyes with the woollen gloves.

6

'Have you finished the standardised price list?' demanded Nil Ilyich, 'Tatiana Markovna, I am asking you a question. I want the list to go to Leningrad by a messenger tomorrow morning. Also that complaint about the price of beer at the Red Samovar. Two citizens have witnessed the signature of Comrade Petuchova of the Women's Section, and the complaint must be typed in triplicate.'

'Ycs, I know.'

'But have you done the price list?'

'I work a machine, Nil Ilyich. I am not a machine. I have not stopped work since nine, and it is nearly two.'

Nil Ilyich looked at her with disgust. She was young and almost pretty in a vague way, but her waved hair and smart blue dress annoyed him by their neatness. Tatiana Markovna painted her nails brilliant scarlet and polished her high-heeled shoes, but she spilt the ink on the floor and broke the routine every day.

'It might be better if you *were* a machine, Tatiana Markovna. Machines never waste time. I know that you are leaving tomorrow, but you must work today, and I want that complaint typed in triplicate. You might think that is a silly complaint because all restaurants charge more for beer in the evenings, but you are not here to think, Tatiana Markovna. You are here to type and not to stare at the snow melting in the park. The diary will tell you it is March and not October.'

She shrugged and slipped a foolscap sheet into her machine. Nil Ilyich came closer to the table.

'You could not have dusted your typewriter for days,' Tatiana Markovna. How very careless! Surely, you know that every machine in this office is state property.'

She seized a dirty green-checked duster and flicked it so violently that several sheets of paper tumbled down on the floor. Nil Ilyich sighed and left the room, and her scarlet-tipped fingers savagely attacked the keyboard.

'Black bread—85 kopeks per kilo. Lard—R.13. Sugar—R.3.50. Beef—R.8. Sausage—R.12', the names given to various kinds of sausage dancing through her mind, she typed almost gleefully, 'Maroussia is poisoned, "Dog's Joy", "Lost in the Mist". Now, Nil Ilyich, that will give you enough for an hour's grumbling . . .'

Tatiana Markovna disliked figures, for figures usually meant money, and thinking of roubles in the abstract reminded her that she owed old Barina nearly a month's wages for a reckless silk blouse and some embroidered underwear. She must be very careful and not leave her new Leningrad address at Kraspole.

'Tatiana Markovna,' came a voice from the door, 'I am called off to an important meeting. Kindly give the papers to Pavel Nikolavich when you have finished. He will expect them before four.'

'All right,' she spoke without turning round.

The door closed. Her fingers stayed perilously idle. Outside the severely uncurtained window the snow ran in countless rivulets. Under the trees it still lay in white patches, but elsewhere it was all yellow and grey. Its appointed time was over, the trees would shelter those scattered white islands for a brief while, and then they would also melt, and black-brown soil breathe freely and begin giving birth to brave young grass. But Tatiana looked at the dying snow without seeing it—in the same manner that she looked at most things which were of no immediate and tangible advantage to her flesh.

Tatiana Markovna . . . Once she had been Tania, a few still called her so, and she had been merely Tanka when she was very small. In those remote years her mother would say in hurried whispers: 'Never tell anyone about your father's past. Just say he was born a peasant. Queen of heaven, that is true enough: he was born an honest peasant in Kostroma province, Ivanova borough, Tushino was the village, not even a real village, you understand, Tanka, no church in it, just a hamlet, a *deremnia*, a bear's den,' and small, frightened Tanka scratched her matted hair and repeated obediently:

'Born a peasant at Tushino, a hamlet in Kostroma province—'

and she kept repeating it because even she knew that in those days the truth might have led to unpleasant consequences. How could she say: 'My father was fourth footman to Prince Darov. The family had served the Darovs for generations. Tushino was on the outskirts of their Kostroma property. My mother used to be one of the Princess's own maids. My father was a loyal Black Hundred man. He saved his master's life once when a revolutionary tried to shoot the prince. In Kiev my father discovered and denounced an underground press, and he had a reward of three hundred roubles from the Tzar's private treasury.' Those were facts, but her father was dead, and her mother burnt the Tzar's letter together with all the photographs and pictures: men and women in dazzling, important clothes, and big houses, ringed by trees and proud with their balconies and ornamental water.

'We are humble peasants, and have always been,' urged her mother, and Tanka kept repeating 'From Tushino, a hamlet, near Kostroma.'

Her mother died in the great famine. Somehow Tanka survived. Somewhere she scooped crumbs of clerical work, and learnt that the most important thing was never to disagree with people who mattered: life was a large field of ice, and if you made the least slip, you fell. Once you fell, you were trampled upon: there was such a crowd about you, there was not enough room for anyone stupid enough to fall. Tanka never fell.

Her direly tattered schooling notwithstanding, she became proficient in clerical work. The elastic spirit of ready acquiescence and a veneer of enthusiasm about matters which Tanka could never understand, got her a job at the Food Commissariat. It teemed with people who mattered. The ground became less slippery. Her education and ideas stayed as tattered as ever, but she soon learnt that in a tidier world clothes meant more than a mere protection from the weather. The people who mattered took sudden notice of her. Tanka enjoyed herself. Then she went to Kraspole, and Kraspole paid her as much attention as if she were a dead fly on a dusty window-sill.

The small-patterned bureaucracy, embodied in Nil Ilyich, disgusted her. The other clerks seemed all ironed out by age and earlier hardships. The crowd of typists filled their lives with work, sports, clothes and cosmetics, but Tanka had but thin use for contemporaries of her own social level. There remained the factories to dismiss at once, and the University. But there the men looked unkempt, worked hard, lived harder, and were not excited by provocatively coloured scarves, well-waved hair, and astute use of lilac powder. Kraspole, decided Tania, was a wilderness, and for the first time she grew introspective in a manner her timid little mother would have condemned. Tania's work remained prosaic. Her surroundings never could be.

The office was housed in a palace. No amount of wanton damage or neglect could have destroyed the pure loveliness of Rastrelli's lines, the high ceilings, the sculptured doors, and the proud spaciousness of the whole place. The walls of her own room were stripped of their brocade panels, but their loftiness remained. The graven rose garlands above the door lintel were coated with grime, and the intricate inlay of the floor showed many an ugly gash, yet some beauty still lingered among the desolation. Because Tania could not reason, her reaction was clumsy and pedestrian. It was clumsy to say to a casually met stranger over a glass of tea at the Red Samovar:

'Yes, I am a clerk at the Food Trust. It is rather sad—just to think it had once been a palace . . .'

A week later she went to Leningrad. On the platform of Baltisky Station a man spoke to her. He looked unprepossessing and small, his shoulders were hunched, his clothes might have been new before she was born. He spoke with a clipped foreign accent, and said he came from Riga. Tania never believed what people said about themselves, but she must needs stop and listen because within an instant his words had done their work: she was frightened.

'It is sad to think of a palace turned into an office? You were right saying it, and you ought to know—once there were great princes in your life.'

If Tania had any imagination, she might have thought of spiders.

She caught her breath, hugged her grey coat, and whispered back: 'What a story, and I don't even know who you are.'

Under the broad-brimmed hat the thin ugly face looked secretive. 'Why, he has not shaved since yesterday,' she thought stupidly, and heard the clipped voice sketching her past in brief revealing flashes. She drew back.

'A fancy tale,' her heart hammered, her mouth was a piece of leather, 'who could have spun it to you?'

'You know it is true,' his un-Russian Russian both frightened and intrigued her. 'You don't matter very much, but some people are interested in you. You will be wise to remember this address,' he repeated it three times and vanished. She never saw him again.

It was all futile, foolish, melodramatic. Even the element of possible ultimate danger did not altogether redeem it from piteous smallness. But Tania remembered the address. Kraspole had both slighted and bored her. Her mother's crudely stressed urge to caution had indeed answered in the troubled days, but these were over, and the excitement of coming near to deflowered glories played on Tanka's poorly furnished imagination. She had just enough wit not to pretend to exalted antecedents. It would be a relief, she told herself, to be honest about her beginnings.

It was gratifying to be admitted into a bleak back room in a dim house in a lonely lane behind Catherine Canal in Leningrad, and to be singled out by its occupants as an uncommon social specimen: a girl of plebeian descent with monarchist tendencies. It pleased her to be given absurd Dumaesque passwords and to speak them in a studiously lowered voice: 'The eagle is asleep', or 'The Gold Company' or 'Niobe has not wept'. It pleased her to use titles no longer heard in the outside world. Mindful of her beginnings, Tania never addressed those shabby men and women in the informal manner of an equal: she never forgot that she was a girl of plebeian descent. Once that descent had been a dire necessity, later it sank to the grey shelf of the usual level; in the dim back rooms it shone provocatively, it gleamed, it stirred interest.

She came to find other curtained off refuges scattered here and

there in the lonelier streets of the city, all of them in dingy backyards, all poorly furnished, with huge padlocks to their doors and double frames to the windows, and those frames, contrary to usage, were not taken out in the summer. All such corners gave shelter to kin-minded tenantry, shabby and forlorn, incredibly battered by inward anguish and outward circumstances. Yet the polish had not gone off their manners, nor the old fluid grace from their speech. Themselves shadows, they were housed in shadows, and spent their time dreaming of a shadow to come.

It was all sad, forlorn, and futile, but Tania loved it. Certain things puzzled her. Faultless French she had expected, but broken Russian rang enigmatic against that background. 'I suppose those come from Riga or Reval,' she thought, and dared ask no questions. She listened to rivers of talk. Somewhere there loomed a dim outline of a stage set on a cloud, but the outline never drew nearer to her. Occasionally her services were asked for: she would act as postman, wait near an appointed gateway, linger by a shop window, and deliver a message as full of empty legerdemain as the pathetic passwords.

But it was an adventure, and her sense of boredom vanished. If Kraspole had now come to her, she would have repulsed it. On rest days she travelled between Kraspole and Leningrad, and no longer concerned herself with male passengers: she chose dim corners, and kept aloof, grave and preoccupied.

Now she was leaving. She got a room in Leningrad and no work as yet. Her savings were pitifully slender, her small debts numberless, but for once the sense of adventure made her grind all thought of security under her feet. She was a good worker, there were advertisements in 'Pravda', she might be fortunate enough to get a private berth. And she would be in Leningrad . . .

She finished the work, carried it away, locked the typewriter, and left the room without a single glance at its broken splendour. Outside, by the path running to a cluster of old limes she saw a girl in a brief sheepskin coat, an absurd astrakhan cap on her red hair. Tania did not know her. But the girl said:

'I think you are Tatiana Markovna . . . You spill ink and always upset routine,' her face was laughing as if she meant Tania to share a joke against someone else, but Tania stared and answered coldly:

'That is my name. But I don't know you at all, and I think such remarks are grossly offensive.'

She walked on swiftly. Dasha did not try to follow her.

'How odd she is! She looks as if she were walking in the snow, silk slippers on her feet—but why?'

chapter four

'ASK OF THE ARROW OF FLAME'

I

THE little house, at the farthest end of Dubovaya, had but one floor. 'It is better so,' said Frossia, 'stairs might trouble Igor when he is alone. And the place felt like a home, Dasha, even before our furniture came down from Leningrad. There are rooms which, though small and low-ceilinged, have spaciousness about them. And I shall feel a Croesus with these yellow curtains,' she laughed. 'The windows asked for them . . . And just imagine that in a few weeks I shall be able to tell Igor about the apple-blossom.'

'There is little else in the garden,' said Dasha, and added, 'but I must go.' She offered no excuse, and hurried down Dubovaya, saying to herself: 'I must go, I left things so untidy at the workshop,' but the gaunt oaks down the street mocked her insincerity. 'You are hurrying because you feel restive. Spring is coming, Dasha, and spring has something of greed in it, and you are greedy, and you don't know what you want.'

She did not. Igor and Frossia were at Kraspole. Dasha spent hours helping Frossia to settle down, she went to the hostel often enough,

listened to Gleb's arguments and Kirill's drollery, watched Trofim's gathered-in face, and laughed at Nikolai's fierceness, but all of them, even Miss Thompson and Lev Kirillich, seemed to be inside a house, and she, Dasha, was outside, by a window, and sometimes she pressed her face against the glass, and the interior went so dim that she must imagine separate details. Always within that room, be it at Frossia's, or at No. 47, or in the orange-painted workshop, there remained a dark corner, garlanded with thick cobwebs, and in that corner lay a boy whom few knew and nobody wanted, and to that boy one could talk about the miracle of breaking leafage, and the exultation of waters freed from their ice bondage, and one could also tell him about people who wore silk slippers when walking in the snow, but to that boy one could never say: 'You seem truly risen from the dead. I can't even cry when I think of your beginnings because my pity will have nothing to say to tears. When you read poetry or when you talk, you fill a world with something that is more than music heard by the ear. When you are silent, there is also music. You are impatient, moody, and sometimes you are remote and even rude. I could never understand your depths . . .' and because Dasha lived so much in the words she felt she might never speak, many lesser things grew as irksome and unnecessary as a winter coat worn on a May morning.

Sometimes, on a clear blue evening, she took her unrest down the lane, where the banks were already putting on their fresh spring dress, and she went through the larch coppice, and farther, to the sandy beach, so far that she was glad of a cart to take her back to Kraspole. The beach spread for miles, flat and sandy, occasional patches of purple rock breaking the yellow monotony. On quiet evenings she had the music of the tide drifting out to dark grey spaces. Sometimes a fisherman's sail, faded red or brown, stole in the distance to be caught in the dim golden haze from the west. Sometimes she stopped to listen to the shrill chorals of hungry seagulls spiralling overhead. The sea was vast and always alone. What love Dasha could give it had to be impersonal. The world of grey-green waters and lonely shore had no room in it for the narrow

flounces of sentiment, and the smallness of things, which so often stifled Dasha at No. 47, fell away and vanished, and she felt alone but free, loosed from all the trammels of everyday life.

One morning she went to the workshop and found it full of visitors. Igor Vladimirovich was there, and old Barina, and Valia. It was a warm morning, the windows were flung open, and a superb bough of an old plum tree swayed and sent its flowered blessing into the room, which bore a strange air of expectancy. Dasha saw that Lev Kirillich wore a freshly laundered blue shirt, his beard was well combed, and his face looked important.

'It is for you to start, Lena,' he grumbled, 'but you won't. Well,' he singled out Igor, Barina and Valia, 'I have called you here . . . Oh, I am no good at speeches . . . Let us start an artel of toy-makers, we are six—one more than is required by law,' he pulled at his beard: 'There are over three million people engaged in artel work—from pearl buttons to barges. Now last year, when I was in Moscow, I saw a show. There were enamels from Palhei, and walrus bone carvings from the Chukchi folk, clay toys from Zagorsk, and such fine needlework from Reshetilovka. I remember a whole room full of Gorky wooden ware—lacquered gold and red, silver and green. Well, good people, *dobrye ludi*, we can't do grand things, but toys we can make, and our children need them. And there is no artel at Kraspole.' He ruffled his hair, 'Lena, I have never talked so much in my life. You do the rest.'

'If we agree,' said Miss Thompson, 'we must ask for a proper licence from the Narkomtorg, get registered, and then we can start . . . Lev Kirillich says the room is big enough for six to work in . . . But we must give it a name—'

'The Golden Cockerel—*Zolotoy Petushok*,' said Igor quietly, 'people might think it is a dancing school, but what does it matter? Dasha might carve us a sign, and "Miss" paint it—gold feathers and a crimson crest.'

'But is it in order?' Barina sniffed anxiously, 'I mean they are not likely to come and tell us it is all wrong? And who pays us for the things we make?' she added apologetically, 'I may be a fussy old

woman, but I shall never get used to new ways, and life is hard, nobody can work for nothing.'

'It can't be wrong once we get the licence. Things are done by law, not haphazardly, *matushka*,' answered Lev Kirillich. 'We get paid for piece work, and prices are good.'

Her face brightened, and they drank lavishly sugared tea in honour of the Golden Cockerel.

The stolen morning hours might remain unmentioned at No. 47, but the Golden Cockerel must needs be explained, and Anna Trofimovna grumbled.

'I thought old Barina would have more sense. Toy-making in these hard days when everybody is over-driven with work. How will you earn your keep? Look at the girls at the Food Trust—one of them has had five new dresses this year! Of course, they are clerks, cultured workers. Little wonder they are in clover . . .'

Nil Ilyich smiled.

'You have said enough, Ania. People must be left alone.'

'Have another herring, will you?' grudgingly offered Anna Trofimovna, 'there are more than enough of them, and Nil Ilyich has no stomach for herrings.'

Dasha thought: '“Miss” looked at me so kindly when she said she had a tiny spare nook behind her bedroom. It will not have green satin curtains, and there is only a mattress, no bed, but there will be fresh air,' and she heard Nil Ilyich say heavily:

'Can't you answer your own mother?'

'Why, yes, the girls at the Food Trust. Five new frocks. Yes, *mamochka*, they must be clever . . .'

'I offered you another herring,' sighed Anna Trofimovna, and remembered a platform phrase, 'we must all be builders of socialism. Nil Ilyich made a fine speech about it last week. You should have gone to hear him. And how can you build anything when you waste your time on silly things? The Golden Cockerel indeed? Crow . . . Crow . . . Crow . . . That is all the profit you will get from it. Nil Ilyich,' she turned appealingly, 'couldn't you . . .'

'No,' Nil Ilyich rose majestically and went to a whatnot to move

a small blue china box from the left to the right, 'I offered my help once. It was refused. I have finished with her. Yes, completely. I am a man of some self-respect. I could not belittle myself. Definitely finished. Besides, there is no vacancy. Leningrad has just sent a girl to fill Tatiana Markovna's post, and a most capable girl she is,' his glossy face brightened, 'the other day I made her type a report in duplicate. I had forgotten that it should have been done in triplicate. I said to her, "Anna Vasilievna, didn't you think it should have been done in triplicate?" and she said, "Yes, Nil Ilyich, but it is not my place to contradict you." She is a treasure.'

Dasha, refusing the herring, escaped to her room.

'Yes,' she thought, 'it may be only a nook, no green satin curtains or mahogany furniture. The mattress will be hard and lumpy, but there will be no eiderdowns to smother you every time you sit down at table . . .'

Yet the Golden Cockerel was started, documents were signed, and the modest equipment purchased. A dark-browed inspector from Leningrad came down, scrutinised and approved, and all the fears of Barina's vanished at the sight of important typed warrants and deep violet seals. Now Dasha had less and less time to brood over the greyness of No. 47, and it broke upon her that there was a rare blessing in having a place and work of her own. Spring came and went, the hot cloak of summer covered Kraspole, and often they worked under the old plum tree in Lev Kirillich's garden, and the oldness of the work they were doing—for all their modern tools—broke upon Dasha as she remembered the stone-hewn *babas* seen in Leningrad. Things made under the brightly gleaming sign of the Golden Cockerel somehow brought her closer to those unknown artists, and she strove to stay patient, refusing to wax fierce over her inability to interpret all she felt, and went on carving dolls, horses, bears, and rabbits.

One evening, when, the last of them all, Dasha was putting her tools away, Lev Kirillich brought out a slim exercise book covered in faded brown.

'Do you know anything of magic? I toiled the whole morning

over that Tartar horseman, but the wood is so knobbly, he keeps looking like a turnip pulled out the wrong side up. I can't read this script, but someone said there was a spell here. Don't you laugh,' he glowered, though her face stayed grave, 'I have a corner for those old things. They are not to be laughed at . . .' he explained in a quieter voice, 'I got it in the South years ago from a priest who was very drunk. But he gave me the book with his blessing. Read it—there might be something useful.'

The script covered the first page. It was old, spidery and pale. Dasha read slowly:

'I shall stand, my back to the West, my face to the East. I shall watch till I see an arrow of flame fall from the clear sky. I shall pray to the arrow and surrender myself to its will. I shall ask of the arrow "Where art thou sent, oh arrow of flame?" It shall answer: "To the dark forests, to the deep bogs". I shall say to the arrow, "Oh arrow of flame, fly where I send thee, fly to my beloved, smite her in her proud heart, smite her limbs, smite her blood, smite her honeyed lips, that she fall into anguish and yearn for me under the noon sun and also at dawn, under the young moon and under the icy wind, through days of gain and days of loss, till she come to kiss me, fold me in her arms, and lie with me. My words are done. My words are true. My words are as great as the sea. My words are stronger than steel against stone. For ever and ever. Amen."'

'You read well—like a brook in the hills,' commented Lev Kirillich, 'but the spell is no good to me. It is not likely to make knobbly wood obey me. Well, I had better burn the book.'

'May I keep it?' asked Dasha and, later, the green satin curtains drawn apart, the July night spending its fragrant passion upon the lilac garden, she stood, small and hesitant, by the window, repeating the old, old words: 'I shall stand, my back to the West, my face to the East . . . I shall watch till I see an arrow of flame fall from the clear sky. I shall pray to the arrow and surrender myself to its will.' No golden arrow clove through the dark blue night, and Dasha told herself that the spell had captured her merely by its link

with the ancient stone *babas* dug up from the immense steppes in the south, where the spell had been first caught into words.

At Kraspole they soon began discussing the Golden Cockerel. The small artel had no shop, all they made was sold direct to schools, hospitals and clubs, but in the summer they worked either in the garden or with the door open, and children returning from school, and women, their marketing done, would cross the yard and linger by the doorway. The children crowded, thumbs in mouths, but the women were talkative enough:

'Look you, that shaggy brown dog! Just what I would like for Timoshka, and he is in hospital, poor little mite!'

'Manka, ah Manka, see that doll in the striped dress! Paint laid on as if it were silk, and doesn't it shine?'

'Well, I reckon anyone would dig their teeth into that apple . . . Fallen off a tree, that is what it looks like, why, even the bruise is there.'

Those were not interruptions. The children's silence, the women's chatter, seemed an appraisal Dasha would have found it hard to forgo as the crowded weeks slipped by. Gradually, all lectures, the cinema, even room No. 20, were crowded out. The Golden Cockerel was in its first and most important year. They must expend greatest care on what orders came their way, and November 7th meant children's festivals all over the country. They could not begin getting ready too early, urged Lev Kirillich, fingering the ink-blotched ledger.

'Dasha can do most of the animals, and "Miss" will paint them. Igor Vladimirovich,' Lev Kirillich bowed towards Igor's bench, he always spoke to him with a small neat bow as if he felt that Igor's presence among them, for all his few words and his quiet, was an honour the Golden Cockerel had not quite merited, 'Igor Vladimirovich has promised to do the planing for supports. Now the dolls . . . Barina, do you think you and Valia could dress about five hundred girls by October? There is material enough and to spare,' he gestured towards a tumbled mass of multi-coloured stuff on the floor, 'but the time, the time, *matushka*.'

'Well, we will try,' said Barina, but Valia interfered.

'I might dress some dolls, Lev Kirillich, but I would like to do something of my own—a panel of the peasant and the turnip,' she explained in her carefully level voice, 'you remember—that turnip growing so large, and the peasant, his wife, children, dog, cat, and mouse all tugging away at it. It could be painted later . . .'

'Get on with the dolls, Valia,' grumbled Barina, 'a panel . . . it would take you months to finish it, and we are paid for piece work—'

'It will be something different, Barina. It might fetch more than twenty roubles. I saw a panel at a children's club in Leningrad, it looked fine.'

Hesitation stole over the room and, from her own bench, Dasha glanced at Valia. Valia's face was pale, her lips set, for once she was not smiling, and her thin work-stained hands were clenched as if she were going to do something difficult, lovely, exciting, and dangerous.

'I don't understand her at all,' mused Dasha, 'they are all in daylight, even old Barina, tiresome as she is. Igor, for all his blindness, is so much together with us all. He sits there, he may not speak for hours, but you have him all close and clear. But Valia, where does she belong?' And almost unaware, Dasha said aloud, 'Why, yes, it would be something different, and the subject is dramatic enough, but do you think you could do it?' she asked it very simply, her words innocent of the least emphasis, but Valia's hands fell limp on her lap, and the smile curved the corners of her mouth, as she replied, looking straight at Dasha:

'Yes, Daria Petrovna, I think I could do it. Yes, I could,' she repeated slowly to herself, and her voice was a curtain thrown over other words left unspoken. 'I shall do it if only to make you envy me,' and Dasha wondered why Valia should hate her so much.

Yet there was not much margin for such thoughts. The work began tumbling into the Golden Cockerel. A whole medley of wooden toys had to be ready before winter fell, and Dasha's leisure shrank and shrank. Once she ran into Kirill at a corner.

'We miss you sometimes,' he said, surprisingly grave.

'Who does?'

'Well, myself, and Nikolai, and Trofim, I think, though he says very little.'

'Is Gleb away?'

'No, but he would not miss you—nor anyone else. He has begun working on a book.'

'I must run,' Dasha was brief, 'I will come once this work is finished.'

He laughed.

'Still call it work? Well, ideas must differ. Yes, we may invite you again.'

But Dasha was too far away to feel hurt. In those days she was conscious of being caught up into something, as if there hung a great cloud, all primrose and pale rose, somewhere above her. Every morning she woke wondering whether the hesitant colours would part, disclose some greater beauty they now screened, and fling a gift into her hands. Day by day she carved the animals appointed to her share, and days grew into weeks, and Kraspole sank into the golden pool of high summer, and the gold stayed for its time, and then changed into a dazzling plethora of early autumn, and the Golden Cockerel continued its labour. October was almost at the door, they all worked together, and Valia's panel was finished at last, and won lavish praise. Even Dasha understood that the enigmatic girl had caught something into that piece of wood, the bending figures were so terse, their longing to get at the turnip was so passionately evident. The old folk-story was here translated in sweeping terms of creation trying to get closer to the mother-earth. 'I could not have known she had so much in her,' marvelled Dasha, and gave unstinted admiration, and Valia smiled, and stayed silent, but Dasha guessed that her sense of triumph sprang from far darker depths than most of them could imagine.

Old Barina, surprisingly enough, gave them all joy. Within those orange walls she ceased airing her small-scaled grievances, and took childlike pleasure in her toil. Dasha shared the

Once she achieved a horse's harness, and embroidered the tiny saddle so exquisitely that they all wasted ten minutes in admiring it.

'It ought to go to a museum,' said Miss Thompson, and Lev Kirilich thundered:

'Well, if it goes to the museum, it must go as a gift. Barina, would you like to make a gift of it?'

'I must have money,' she said piteously, and nobody smiled, and Valia stooped over her bench.

'Yes, Barina, money is good. You must have money for it.'

Some of them carried their work home to finish an odd piece at their leisure. Dasha did not. No. 47 was a blanket over her mind, all the thicker sometimes because she felt she must stay on there a little longer. Miss Thompson had made her gentle tentative offer, and Frossia asked sometimes:

'Does so much work make it any easier? Dashenka, you must tell me if you feel the walls are too thick there.'

And Dasha answered: 'I will tell you.'

Yet there came mornings when she yearned for a swift escape from the ugliness and the comfort, and evenings when she felt drained of all energy. She stayed on. Little by little she came to realise that underneath the crudely painted skin, Anna Trofimovna's face looked human, sometimes bewildered, and a little sad. Then Dasha abruptly, almost reluctantly, remembered the Maly Prospect days, and the woman who had been a shadow and yet had loved her in her own clumsy fashion. Yet, with Nil Ilyich in the room, Maly Prospect could hardly be mentioned. Seeking for some opened door, finding she could express neither pity nor understanding, Dasha found an outlet in bad temper.

'Go to the devil,' she shouted at Nil Ilyich one evening. She had refused a second helping of cabbage pie, and he had said:

'You can't even appreciate your mother's cooking. I marvel at you. You are a wooden doll. Not a sentient individual. You have no sense of sociology.'

'Go to the devil!'

He put down his fork. His stumpy fingers tore at a piece of wheaten bread.

'You heard?' he challenged Anna Trofimovna, 'your own child, telling me, your husband, to go to the devil! I am a fully enlightened man, and I know there is no devil, but the unspeakable lack of civility is there. You heard it, and you say nothing. Why, you should have boxed her ears!'

'If you touch me,' Dasha said quietly, 'I will go and fetch a militiaman. You know that sort of thing is against the law. You are so enlightened you should never forget it.'

'No,' he breathed like a well-stoked samovar, 'I would never touch you, but this is my house, and I must ask you not to shout rude things at my table. This house, Daria Petrovna, belongs to cultured people, and you forget it too often.'

Anna Trofimovna wept. Dasha wished she might run to her chair, fling her arms round her neck, and whisper, '*Mamochka*, you are still my *mamochka*. Don't mind him. He is a stranger,' but she knew her mother would never understand. She gulped her scalding tea and left the room.

The stove had not been lit in her little bedroom. Dasha brought in a candle from the kitchen, drew the curtains for warmth, and got on the bed, pulling the soft satin quilt up to her chin. She felt frightened of herself, and kept the candle burning in the room lest her fears were to grow in the dark.

Always at No. 47 all the dim, hateful and twisted things in her rose to the surface, and clamoured for doors to be opened to them, and threw thick dust upon any heightened moment of clear and bold vision, making her feel small and useless in body and shrunken in her mind. At No. 47 Dasha found keen pleasure in telling variedly coloured lies, in exiling charity from her judgment, sometimes even in listening to the grey knotted rumble of gossip garnered from the backyards of Kraspole.

Of course, she had her more fortunate, differently coloured moments in the street, at the Golden Cockerel, in Room No. 20, with Gleb and Kirill, with Miss Thompson and Lev Kirillich, above

all, with Frossia whom now she saw so seldom because Frossia worked in Leningrad, and her day's meagre margin was almost wholly given over to Igor. In those moments Dasha felt herself clean, widened, and unhampered as though a burden she had never sought were being lifted off her shoulders, and then she knew herself to be glad of anything—even a crudely carved *mishka* or wet snow falling against her cheek. But such brightly woven moods left her as she mounted the three wooden steps and found herself in the room smothered with green plush and china knick-knacks.

The candle began spluttering in its slender wooden stick, and Dasha decided that, all weariness notwithstanding, she would go to the Golden Cockerel and work. Lev Kirillieh, she knew, usually went to drink tea with Miss Thompson.

Snow had fallen early that year, and it came quietly, with much gentleness and in great dignity. It never tumbled down in the angry arms of a blizzard. It fell softly, lovingly, as if its secret intent was to carpet the ground in immaculately moulded beauty, and now Dubovaya lay before Dasha, blue-white in the gathering twilight, and she breathed deeply. There stirred no wind, the old oaks, lightly snow-powdered, kept still, and in the shadows she could but guess at their pure grandeur; but the stillness, the gleaming snow, and the abrupt kiss of cold air upon her flushed face, all reminded her of life, the sense of proportion she was so often in peril of losing, and something like permanence behind the swiftly changing scene of seasons, emotions, custom, and behaviour.

It was one of those moments when she grew, and stayed all thanksgiving for the hard won freedom of her limbs, and was aware of her secret, unshapen strivings, and shed her impatience to urge them into an immediate expression, when something within her knew that, were she truly to will it, she might capture a star into the hollow of her hand. Almost she felt as if someone's love-impelled understanding reached her-wards, seized the grey stained cloak of her temper and her crudity, and trampled it underfoot, so that she could continue her way, no longer tethered or ashamed.

She found Lev Kirillich at the door, buttoning up his huge sheepskin coat. The room looked warm and inviting, and his smile deepened her pleasure.

'What? Come to work? Well, *golubushka*, you must not pour too much into a full bowl, you know.'

Alone, Dasha went to her bench. A few half-finished rabbits lay there. Their ears were too big, she did not like them, but Lev Kirillich always said they must not waste material, and she could not destroy them. She picked up one rabbit and knew it looked what it was: poor and limited, a dead thing made out of dead wood. 'If I were a child, I should hate it,' thought Dasha, threw it down, and wandered off to Valia's bench by the stove. The turnip panel had been a great success, and now a large oblong of faultlessly planed linden wood lay there for Valia to begin another relief. Dasha knew it was a very special piece of wood. Igor had spent hours on the planing of it, and it had not a flaw. Dasha bent down, her cold hand stroking the smooth satin surface. In an instant she was at her own bench, the oblong in her hands.

It was not her wood. It would not have mattered greatly, had it belonged to Barina, or Miss Thompson, or Lev Kirillich. It was Valia's and Valia, who smiled so much, could hate. But Dasha threw off her small astrakhan cap, unbuttoned her grey *shuba*, and sat down, looking at the oblong, and in that second the inexplicable came into the quiet room. She never saw or felt the way of its coming, but the virginal oblong and her own hands became at one with some singing urgency in her mind. The primrose cloud, fringed with pale rose, was rolling away, and she caught her breath at what she saw beyond.

Her hands moved slowly, humbly. She worked on, unaware of time, of the dull pain in her muscles and, as she worked, the singing within her, which was no song at all, kept deepening and enlarging its theme. The theme was a woman's face with its tenderness and courage, its stubbornly young quality, the face of a woman who had understood the beauty of permanence and the secret of a glory born of all small and humble things, a woman who had once been afraid

and puzzled also, and faced both fear and bewilderment with unborrowed calm . . .

It was late when Dasha put down her tools. Lev Kirillich had not yet returned. She was tired, but her thought kept clear, and a newly born sense of judgment came to her. She looked at what she had done. Certain lines, her sudden intuition whispered, were not quite true, a few details would have to be softened here and there, but she knew she was not looking at a mere piece of wood, but at a face to which she had given life—Frossia's face.

Very quietly Dasha went back to No. 47. She heard voices from the parlour, crept to her room on tiptoes and secreted her treasure in the wardrobe. Tomorrow it would have to be revealed and, possibly, judged. Tonight it remained wholly hers, the most intimate possession she had ever been blessed with.

Next morning she found them all crowded by Valia's bench. Through the window-panes a rose-golden day was beginning its brief winter journey, but the spacious room seemed somehow dull. She stopped, the closed door behind her, the relief, carefully wrapped in grey linen, under her arm. They turned. Barina hissed:

'Lev Kirillich says you worked late last night. Do you know anything of it? Valia's wood has been stolen—'

They waited for her. She stood by the door. She spoke quietly: 'It has not been stolen. I took it. And I have used it—'

The room was still. Igor kept quiet, his hands folded, his small greying head turned away from the door, and Dasha could not see his face. Miss Thompson's eyes looked uncertain. Lev Kirillich rumbled his hair with both hands. The room was still, and it felt cold and grey to Dasha. Then suddenly Barina stamped her foot, she wore cloth shoes, the noise was small and muffled, but it startled them all.

'You never took it. You stole it—from my poor little Valia. Igor Vladimirovich, Lev Kirillich, we must have justice. It was planed for Valia. It was very special wood. Lev Kirillich, you said she was to have very special wood—'

But nobody spoke. There were taut wires all over the room. Slowly Dasha moved from the door, unwrapped the relief, and held it face downwards.

'Igor Vladimirovich,' she stood by his chair and put the panel between his hands, 'you should be the first. I watched you examine Valia's work.' She stood, seeing his hands fold over the panel, his fingers move from temple to chin, but the quiet was once again splintered by Barina's wail:

'So you stole it—just to make someone's portrait.'

Dasha tried to speak patiently:

'I never stole it. I needed some wood last night. There was not any other. We agreed that all tools and materials would be held common. Lev Kirillich must decide—but,' she drew a small proud breath, 'I can't say I am sorry . . .'

The lame old man moved to Igor's chair. Cold winter sunlight caught both men into its pale dusty haze and fell on the panel in Igor's hands. He raised his face and fumbled for Lev Kirillich's fingers.

'Yes?'

Lev Kirillich bowed. He always bowed to Igor.

'It is Euphrosynia Pavlovna,' he stammered. 'It is she the way all of us think of her, Igor Vladimirovich,' and he turned and sought Miss Thompson's eyes. 'Lena,' he rubbed his right cheek, 'she has done this, and she has asked me to decide. What is there to decide?'

Barina stamped her foot once again.

'I am sure I don't know what is the matter with you all. You look, yes, even you, "Miss", as though you had seen a cloud come down and touch the earth. Well, we can all see it is Euphrosynia Pavlovna. True to life, and there is nothing remarkable in it. But the wood belonged to my poor Valia. Lev Kirillich must arbitrate.'

He stood, clenching and unclenching his enormous fists.

'But, Barina, it is clear as daylight.'

'As clear as a thick fog,' she broke in. 'You must be formal. We are an artel. It is an official matter,' when angry she looked like a

flustered, dishevelled hen astray from her yard. 'Yes, we are an artel.'

'Well,' he shrugged, 'the way I take is that the wood was specially prepared for Valia, but she had not begun her work. She can be given another piece of wood—just as good. Now don't interrupt, Barina, I am speaking officially. As to what Dasha has done with it, none of us can judge. How can we?' He was a small boy fumbling for his words. 'There are artists in Moscow and Leningrad, let them see it.' He lunged forward and took Dasha by both shoulders, '*Ispolai tebe, duslia moye*, more power to your elbow, my soul . . .'

'All the same, my poor Valia,' began Barina, when Valia's own voice broke from a corner:

'Oh Barina, must you bother so? What does it matter? Look at Daria Petrovna's work. It is fine. Now she will be going to the academy in Leningrad, and we shall have to get another member perhaps, but anyone can get used to strangers. Must you go on, Barina? Daria Petrovna might think we are such uncultured people not to see how beautiful it is.' The words rang sincerely enough, the thin pale face looked calm, but Dasha wished Valia would not smile.

The glory of the morning was over. Dasha would not return to No. 47. She ate tepid potato cutlets and some jelly at a crowded communal *stolovaya*, the relief, wrapped in its grey linen, on her knees. The food eaten, she went towards the tumble-down park gates.

Kirill was not in the room. Gleb stood by the table, a book in his hands, his face caught up in a smile. But the smile died when he saw her.

'I was reading Blok,' he said by way of a welcome, 'I am very tired. Too tired to be polite to strangers. You used to come so often. You have been away almost for months. You have become a stranger . . . Kirill is away in Moscow, I think. And we have had trouble with the twins. You need not pretend to be interested. Nikolai and Trofim are moving away from each other faster and faster. There is nothing more horrible than love without understanding . . . Well, it is nice to see you—but I have not eaten yet.

If you are late in the canteen, you might get tepid gruel and not much else . . . Forgive me for talking so much,' he laid the book face upwards, and waited for her.

'It has all been work,' she said awkwardly.

The room was warm and airless and thick with stale smoke. She had not even unbuttoned her *shuba*, but she felt chilly.

'Yes? The Golden Cockerel,' his politeness was too casual not to be rude. 'Those everlasting toys! But a good, gleaming name you have given it.'

'Not only toys, Gleb. It has been more than that. I think I have had to find myself . . .' Her cold fingers struggled with the stiff folds of the grey linen. 'I wanted you to see it. It is the first—I mean—'

He took the panel and carried it to the window. His voice rang hot with indignation:

'It is more than unfair. It is criminal of you . . . You come here, you excite us all, I don't know why, and then you vanish, bury yourself in some old handicraft, grow into a stranger, and one must learn you all over again—even in ordinary ways, and then you bring such a thing, and I have no key to your language at all. You are a sealed book, that is what you are.'

'But it is open,' she said shyly, 'the front page—that is . . .'

He brought back the panel. His eyes were veiled again.

'Well, I bow to you.' He might have been speaking to a stranger. 'Now you must forgive me, and come again, but don't ride a pink-coloured cloud all the time. Please,' he opened the door for her, 'I can't ask you to forgive my rudeness—it is too much part of me.'

Hours later Dasha went back to No. 47. Under her *shuba* she wore an overall stained with multi-coloured paint. Her feet in their grey felt *valenki* had badly darned stockings on, and she had a blister on her left heel. Under the absurd grey cap her hair was a flaming tousled mop. She felt hungry, but she heard the chatter from the parlour, and paused in the dim hall.

A woman's fat satisfied voice was saying:

'You are right, *matushka*, some names are as odd as onions in a

jelly. Someone I knew, Fekla by name, it always made me think of *svekla*, her face used to look like beetroot, and—'

'Wait a minute,' broke in Anna Trofimovna, 'I have just remembered a story. A countess went to heaven, and met St. Piemen, and asked for his prayers. "The church called you the neighbour of virtues, show me charity," she said, and St. Piemen answered, "Madam, you kept my ikon in the kitchen, I was not important enough for any other room in your house, and you must excuse me—I am fully occupied in praying for your cook."'

Both laughed. Teaspoons tinkled against saucers. Dasha slipped into the kitchen and foraged for some bread and a pickled cucumber. She felt too rich that day to quarrel with anyone's poverty.

2

In spring, thought Frossia, you must think of the house you live in, and bring growing life into your room. She would not cut the apple-blossom, but the forlorn patch of rough ground, a formal garden in forgotten years, began to occupy her.

'But I must not belong to it too much,' she said to Igor, 'though I hope there may be less of a wilderness next year. I like the work,' she confessed, looking at her earth-stained hands, 'one can think so much when close to the earth. I have been thinking of Dasha's panel, Igor. It is not me at all. It is someone who has walked in pure sunlit virtue all her days. It is too lovely to be crude even in its flattery—but it is not me. And that reminds me. Someone said that you hardly ever talk at the Golden Cockerel. It does not matter here—your silence and your speech have become one thing to me—but strangers are different,' she paused, her eyes purposely away from his face.

'Well, nobody chatters much there. We work too hard. I am such a novice, *dushenka*. I must keep my mind within the work. Besides, don't call them strangers—we are all knit together there. A shared handicraft does it for you.' He asked suddenly, 'You have

written to Petrov about Dasha? She must go to Leningrad and study properly.'

'Yes, I have written to Petrov. Of course, she must go.'

It was evening. The day's business lay behind her. She remembered the tea and the small coffee cakes she had bought in Leningrad. She thought—with a feeling of pleasure, a piece of soft satin against her heart—of the candle-lit hour, an open book, and Igor listening to her voice. She thought of her new home, ringed by aged apple-trees, so far apart from all the big and small noises of Dubovaya. She thought that Dasha might come for a few minutes . . .

'She called that panel *Druzhba*, just like that, and our friendship is so vigorous, I might not see her for a week or ten days, or even longer, but when we meet, there are no fallen threads to pick up at all. The day she finished "Friendship," she felt so rich and widened, and knew that the high mood would not endure, but her rebellion has grown so much less fierce. Igor is right: she knows that for the time being she does belong to us all and the Golden Cockerel. And I know how determined she is to discipline her thought and her venture, and to give of her best in those comparatively humble channels. If only,' sighed Frossia, washing her hands under the little tap, 'if only the Academy would accept her for the autumn term, or else No. 47 come to an end somehow. Nil Ilyich has been here for years. There might be a transfer . . .'

'Little heart,' Igor said from the depths of the dim living-room, 'you should not think aloud. But Dasha will be all alone in Leningrad. Even Olga Petrovna has been away for so long.'

'Igor, you have not forgotten Praskovia Dobrina. They are both there—back from Kazan, or was it Kharkov? Surely, you remember Praskovia? If I were a writer, I would like to make a poem about her.'

'How could I forget her? Back, are they? That will be good for Dasha.'

When the candle-lit hour was over, and Frossia sat alone by the tiny table, some mending in her hands, Praskovia Dobrina's rugged chronicle stole through her mind, chapter by chapter.

In the early 'twenties a girl in her teens ran away from a dim village near Ufa, and made her own way to Moscow because she wanted 'to learn figures'. She had been a petty thief and vagrant, her incredible ugliness warred against her, but the passion for study burned so high in her that all her lapses came to be forgiven, and she was sent to learn mathematics at a college in Leningrad. She worked so fiercely that within eight years she found herself a fully fledged lecturer in higher mathematics, and was sent to Kazan.

She had almost no cheekbones, an obvious streak of Mongolian blood ran in her, and her nose was a flattened button pressed into the deeply tanned pancake of her face. Her magnificent teeth might have redeemed some of the ugliness, but the loose thick lips spoilt what shred of beauty she had. Sallow, ugly and unattractive, always wearing loud colours, she met Vassia Gukin, a priest's son, a clever surgeon, small, pale, fastidious and gentle. People laughed in Kazan.

'An elm leaf and a sunflower.'

At the registry office the woman clerk marvelled at Praskovia's surname.

'So you are a Russian after all?'

'From Ufa,' Praskovia answered gravely. 'You can't tell a Russian from a Tartar in those places, and why should you? Most of the women must have slept with Tartars some time or other.'

'Praskovia—' protested Vassia, and she silenced him:

'Mathematics have taught me some precision, *golubchik*. There is nothing shocking in facts, and it is best to be clear about them. For instance, I know I love you, and that is a fact.'

The years, which had moulded Frossia and had seen the return of comparatively orderly folds of social life, had worked their own change on Praskovia. Always fierce, she refused quiet—except in her work. Mathematics, she knew, meant a certain cold poise of the mind, and she had learnt how to keep purely professional thought and effort sharply separate from the gorgeously coloured tumble of all her other loyalties and aversions. There were few conciliatory edges to any of them. A fully fledged delegate, she went to a mathematical congress in Moscow. There were some foreign repre-

sentatives. Praskovia's brilliant speech, fitly translated, her appearance sharpened by an orange shawl worn over a turquoise-blue dress and, possibly, fragments of her own story, all attracted the foreigners. The delegate from Italy asked how she had enjoyed her year at a German university.

'Tell him,' Praskovia said to the pink-checked interpreter, a girl from the Intourist, 'tell him that I worked too hard to notice many accidentals. And people paid scant attention to me. I did not mind. Why should a bloody Bolshevik savage be noticed by polite little Germans? And tell him that I never want to go abroad again. It is so boring to be taken for a criminal. A woman in Iena asked me if we were in the habit of strangling sickly babies at birth.'

'Comrade Dobrina, is that really necessary?' murmured the unhappy interpreter, 'we have met here in such a fraternal spirit.'

'Fraternal spirit fiddlesticks!' retorted Praskovia. '*They* don't think so, and why should we? But say what you like. Tell him I put on a lot of weight in that paradise of roast pork and beer . . .'

Later Vassia said:

'I love all mysteries. I think I shall always love you because I could never understand you. You are so cool and precise in your work, and why not carry the precision further? Or else leave politics alone if they madden you.'

'You are just the same,' Praskovia said sombrely, 'fussing about politics, as you call it, is preferable to weeping over a lost stud. Besides, one can't leave madness alone if you live near a madhouse. See, Hitler has taken Austria. He will end by swallowing the whole of Europe, and that won't be done by baking little buns in an oven.'

'We could not have another war—'

'I did not exactly mean war. They are all so busy with their racial purity and their money-bags that they would not have much time for fighting. But imagine the upheaval. Of course, the world must always have some unrest, a completely quiet world would cease to think, but we should be left alone,' her sallow face went a mottled red. 'Vassia, we must be left alone. We may have done a

little already, but you can't climb to the roof if you are kept busy in the cellar.'

Yet, none the less, she was happy to be in Leningrad; it was Vassia's own city; and, in a lesser measure it belonged to her also in spite of the dimly remembered beginnings at Ufa.

'We have no business to be here in spring,' she said, 'now I have a chair at the University, and Vassia will be absorbed in his cerebellum research, and neither of us can afford a single idle hour.' But she idled because all the waters of Leningrad, freed from their wintry bondage, were a choir of music she had not heard for many a year, and because Alexander Gardens were a huge carpet woven with a crowd of colours, because along the great avenues, stretching from east to west, old trees were breaking into the promise of deeper green to come, and the Admiralty spire shone pale golden in dusk. Praskovia idled by the quays and on the bridges, in wide streets and narrow lanes, in the little islands to the north-west of the city, again loving the clean sculptured city which had once blessed her crudest efforts 'to learn figures' when, living in a tumble-down, over-crowded hostel, she struggled with the rudiments of geometry and algebra over salt fish and strawberry-leaf tea. Still very much at her leisure, Praskovia found a home in Vassily Island, close to his hospital and her college, a three-roomed flat, with a kitchen all their own, and windows which gave them the Neva.

Within a week the flat came to resemble a rummage sale stall, its contents ransacked by over-curious and hurried buyers. There were no wardrobes, Praskovia preferred to see her clothes on hooks, and every wall shone with something scarlet or sky-blue flung across it. In a room furnished with a red-draped sofa, a table, some odd chairs, startling green curtains, saucepans and kettles on the floor, and dust generously evident in April sunshine, Praskovia interviewed Tania who, neatly made up, her grey dress pearl-buttoned from throat to hem, stared at the professor of mathematics, her coarse black hair unkempt, her bare feet thrust into shabby emerald kid slippers, her stumpy body wrapped in what looked a huge magenta curtain.

'Sit down,' said Praskovia, 'yes, here is a duster. Well, is your shorthand good? My husband speaks very fast. He is out, and you understand I could not engage you,' she mentioned fairly generous terms and added, 'we don't want you to live in, but we might find you a room in the block.'

'Oh yes, thank you.'

Praskovia said gruffly:

'I don't know you at all, but you look intelligent. Why didn't you choose some interesting work? A secretary is such an echo . . .

Tania thought: 'She is hateful and common. How can she wear magenta with such a skin? But I am in Leningrad, and I need a job,' and she smiled: 'An echo, Professor Dobrina? Well, I suppose so, but I have not had much of a chance in life. You see—' she paused with a studiously delicate sigh, but Praskovia refused encouragement.

'Come tomorrow and see my husband.'

Tania got up. 'I need not have put on my best frock,' she thought, smiled, and went. Praskovia, having passed a comb through her hair, unearthed a diary from under a pile of crumpled newspapers, realised she had an hour to spare, and sat on the floor, her head against the red sofa, to write to Frossia:

' . . . We meet so seldom, and what difference does it make to you and me? In Moscow Olga Petrovna and I had a meal together, and she was full of young Dasha, and called her one of our triumphant vindications, as she calls anything successful happening in Russia, and I had a fine argument with her. To the devil with vindications; we have our own *kasha* to boil, and we shall eat it, and nobody else need sniff at it. Vassia is all right, quiet and loving, and spending himself so much that I feel bothered sometimes. He will stay so quiet—with four operations in one day, and a hole in his sock makes him weep when he is on leave. Well, the radio is terrific, disturbing, and tiresome. I hate Germany, though they were the first to be polite to us, and why should we meddle in any European differences anyhow? I know you will differ. Let it pass. Tumanov says it is our fault that the West disapproves of us, we have not been very forthcoming, but how can you be forthcoming with those who

refuse to accept you as you are? If I met someone's pet bear, I would not condemn the beast for refusing to purr like a cat . . . I was so happy to hear about the Golden Cockerel. And what a blessing it is for Igor . . . On the Sixth Line they are building another great block, nothing but girders to see yet, and I went by, saw one of the men, and shook hands with him. I said nothing at all, he understood, and gripped my hand very hard. That was kinship. You believe in a God, golubushka Frossia, and I can't say that I do, none the less you might pray that some quiet were given to us as a nation . . . Well, I must wash my face. I embrace you. Bow for me to Igor. Your loving friend Praskovia D.'

3

In spring, thought Dasha, it was not only the earth that renewed itself! The people also became different, kindlier, wider . . .

Her 'Friendship' had gone to Moscow. Lev Kirillich's workshop offered her the daily chance of soberly moulded work, but even a humble rabbit no longer provoked her into a mood where all gates seemed shut. She kept repeating to herself that somewhere within her lived that quality which had made 'Friendship' possible. It lived on even though it was denied further expression for a time and, comforted, she accepted No. 47 in a new light. Miss Thompson's offer of a small nook behind her bedroom no longer occupied Dasha: she felt that in a sense she had already made her escape from the contagion of what shallowness lived at No. 47.

That spring she loved Kraspole as never before. 'Why, the park is at prayer,' she thought, walking through that kingdom of old trees in shyly breaking leaf, to room No. 20 where stale smoke rose to the sooty ceiling, where the lamp flickered and, in the dim passage, the smell of boiled cabbage and liver sausage mingled with far less pleasant odours. There Kirill was droll, and Nikolai, grown silent and sombre, sat on the edge of Kirill's bed. Sometimes he stared at her with his huge brooding eyes, and Dasha wondered

if her first impression had been right: there was so little granite left in Nikolai, there seemed some strange new helplessness in him as if he were made of uncarded wool.

Trofim came very seldom. When asked about Trofim, Nikolai answered briefly and sullenly, and looked a little frightened as though a danger he had seen from a distance had come very near him, touching his eyes and his heart. Sometimes he had more words in him. But they were sombre:

'I reckon all of you have got too worldly for him. Or, perhaps, he is shy of you. He is always at work nowadays. The other night I got back to "Tambov", and there he was, scrubbing the floor. Ah well . . .' he waved his huge arm, no longer defiantly but slowly and mournfully as if the air were the only friend left to him, and sat still. Kirill whistled and went out to fetch boiling water from the canteen. Gleb turned to Dasha:

'I have never heard you read poetry. Here is Alexis Tolstoi. Take the short one, "The Mist".'

Dasha read the eight lines:

'The white ridge of the mist
Has risen over the lake;
Anguish and grief have taken possession
Of the young heart.
The mist will not stay for ever,
The wind will waft it away—
Not so the grief and the anguish—
Never may they be healed.'

'Rubbish!' shouted Kirill from the doorway, a huge iron kettle in his hands, 'medicine and good work will cure anything. Fancy reading that old reactionary! I would not have queued up for hot water, had I known.'

'You should read more poetry,' said Gleb, without a glance at Kirill, and he spoke impersonally as if he were addressing an audience in a lecture, then tossed back his head, and laughed; 'I have a girl in one of my seminars. She comes from Kalinin. She is a

fair Pushkinist, but as stubborn as an ox. We were arguing about a text, and she said "Gleb", yes, just like that, "Gleb, I love you, do you understand?"

'What did you say?' Nikolai asked.

'We were working. I told her to get on with the text. She did.'

'Have you seen her since?'

'Seen her since? Nikolai, you fool, I meet her almost every day.'

'Well?'

'Well what?'

'He would like to know if she wept, arms around his neck,' explained Kirill, 'meanwhile, the tea is ready, and we must share mugs, comrades, unless Nikolai prefers a saucepan—but it had milk soup in it yesterday.'

'Wept?' Gleb was impatient, 'she is too sensible for all her foolishness. I could not even say what she looks like. Her work is good. She incises words. That is why I remembered that piece of nonsense . . . I have never noticed her otherwise. How do you expect me to notice them? It is their work I look at, not the way they button their collars,' he drained his scalding tea, got up, and said, looking at nobody: 'I must work', then turned to Dasha, 'There are nice flowers in Leningrad parks. I want to look at the Neva. Will you come tomorrow?'

She hesitated.

'Perhaps, the day after. We are busy at the Golden Cockerel—'

'I have five lectures the day after,' he said briefly, and she went to the station the next morning. His grey suit was shabbily neat. He had polished his boots. His shirt belonged to his body. He gave her a fugitive smile.

'We shall go to the islands when we come to Leningrad. I am glad to be out. There are such queer days when we must be friendly with the earth, and open all windows wide at daybreak, so that the air may wander in and out of the rooms. It is so stuffy and dirty at the hostel. It was never meant for spring months. The window-panes are so fragile that if you opened them, you could not close them again, and Kirill's chest is weak, he is always afraid of colds.'

Dasha listened and wished they were not going to Leningrad but into some open country so that she might find herself free of pavements and cobbled roads, and do something sudden and silly—press her face against the soil, kiss it, adore it, and stay quiet till sundown or even later. She thought it would be good to have her own garden some day, to tire all the muscles weeding and digging and planting, and then watching the growth of unimportant tiny seeds her own hands had thrown into the generous soil. She laughed so loudly and happily that other people in the carriage smiled at her.

‘Why the laughter?’ asked Gleb, and she chose to be candid:

‘Because I have just been in my very own garden which does not even exist . . .’

‘All oneness is so relative,’ he shrugged, ‘I like your dress.’

‘But you never look at anyone?’

‘You are not a student. Your work does not touch me. So I have leisure for other things, and today I am away from college. I like your dress. It is the day’s dress, cool and pink, but you are foolish wearing such a thin coat.’

‘I have a cardigan,’ she said briefly.

Those were such inconsequential details, little more than small copper currency of everyday talk, but she felt almost as rich as when she had worked on ‘Friendship’. Gleb suddenly turned to the window as if he had no more time to spend on talk, but the largesse he had given her lay in her mind, and, satisfied, watching his thin, set profile, Dasha remembered all she knew of the earlier stress and agony his body and mind had known, and remembered it as vividly as if both agony and stress had been her own companions. Yet she smiled at the thin bedraggled woman who smelt of onions and the fat little man whose gaudily embroidered white shirt spoke of some festival or a wedding. She smiled at Leningrad’s tall pale chimneys as they rose, pink-grey in the soft spring sunlight, and then caught Gleb’s grave look.

‘You suggest a pink tulip—except for your hair. Yes, a shy young tulip.’

‘That is out of your poets.’

'I am not so sure . . . I say—I should have asked you—do you wish to go to the Academy and meet people and have a dryly useful day?'

'No, no,' she cried, suddenly frightened, 'let us just have aimless hours—as if there were nothing to do in the world.'

'What a terrible idea!'

They made their way to the Islands where nobody could escape the presence of the sea, where streets were pale-green arrows with their belts of old limes and elms, and where behind elaborate wrought-iron railings old grey-pillared houses told a story of different days. They passed by the Chinese pagoda, its scarlet and green sharply alien in that softly coloured world. They crossed whimsically curved bridges, passed from Elaguin Island, with the pale yellow walls of the old palace behind them, to Egipetsky Island, where Pushkin had once lived, and where some of the houses, dark crimson and pillared, spoke of a vanished passion for old Egypt, and Apothecaries Island where once herb gardens used to flourish, and a small green-shuttered shop still sold odd plants and simples. They wandered in and out, Gleb spoke little, but Dasha was learning not to wonder at his moods. They found some food and drink in a small wooden shack on Kamenny Island where a woman, her thin face speaking of being tired of all circumstance in life, served them at a tiny table covered with a map of Russia printed on cotton. She brought them potato cutlets and some bread *kvas* in tall white mugs, and sighed, and pulled at her shabby grey apron, and Dasha thought:

'Why, she can't be much older than Frossia, and she looks as though she would never recognise spring again,' and because she was all at one with the day's mood, she thanked the woman for the *kvas* and said: 'What a lovely table-cloth! Everything is gorgeous today . . .'

The woman pushed back a wisp of greying hair. Her lips were locked against all such acceptance.

'Yes, it may be all right for you who are young. Little flowers and young grass,' she made a helpless gesture, 'drink your *kvas*,' she

added almost roughly. 'Be glad you can have it. You are so young you would not know what it is to do without.'

Dasha, startled by the bitterness, looked at Gleb. But he had not heard. He was on his feet.

'I say, I had forgotten. I must go to the University.'

'But it is so far—'

'Never mind,' she saw that she was not there for him at all. 'I must see the librarian.'

Later, in the dim vaulted library, Dasha realised that she counted less than a cipher with him. She stood by the door, an intruder in that quiet musty world of crowded bookshelves, dimmed lights, and bent backs. She felt angry. The exquisitely chiselled grace of the morning hours must have been imagined by her, she told herself, seeing Gleb run towards the farthest end of the great room and talk to a small bespectacled man, and she hated the day, her carelessly laundered pink dress, and herself for the poison of her foolish dreams. Gleb came back.

'I must telephone to Kraspole. I am not coming back today. I suppose you might go and eat something at the students' canteen—they will give me a pass for you, and there is a train at five. But I must first telephone Urellov.' The small bespectacled man had come up, and stood, nervously smiling at Dasha, but Dasha had neither smile nor speech, and Gleb went on, excited, a boy given a rare birthday present on an ordinary grey Monday morning: 'What good fortune, Andrei Abramovich, and I might never have heard of it. To hear Platov on Pushkin! They say Platov hardly ever leaves Moscow these days. I have not heard him for two years. I have five lectures tomorrow, and Urellov can take the two morning ones. Urellov is a most kindly man,' he briefly glanced at Dasha. 'Well, we had better go to the canteen.'

Her throat was made of leather, her lips of wood, her eyes went so dim that even the soft lights in the room all but went out, but a hoarse voice behind them echoed angrily: 'Canteen indeed! If it is not Dasha? How many summers, how many winters . . . *Skolko let, skolko zim,*' and Dasha's cold cheeks were kissed by Olga Petrovna.

'The canteen,' Olga Petrovna gestured contemptuously, 'what is the sense of eating last year's cabbage pastics?' and nothing would satisfy her but they must follow her down the quay, to the great block on the Fourth Line, to the small room, littered with half-unpacked luggage, the crimson parrot perched on the drably varnished chest. Gleb had made no protest, and now sat on the floor, his eyes curious, interested. The casual abruptness that had so wounded Dasha in the library, was gone. He had forgotten Platov, Pushkin, Urelov, Kraspole. He sat, hands clasped round his knees, observing Olga Petrovna fuss about the chaotic room.

'Have I then forgiven him?' wondered Dasha, catching herself in a smile. 'Well, no, I have not—there was nothing to forgive.'

There were people, she knew, in whose presence it was easy to identify one's whole self with the moving and beautiful pageant of the whole country, and borrow from their quality the substance for one's own effort. In the presence of such people even the fatuities of No. 47 shrank into nothingness. Lev Kirillich, Miss Thompson, Nikolai and Trofim, and, above all Frössia, and now Olga Petrovna, pathetic in her tired, badly crumpled yellow muslin, dishevelled, sudden, utterly lovable and magnificent, Olga Petrovna, who leapt from one city to another, who bullied everybody so that more books, paper, maps and ink might be sent to the remotest corners of the huge and hungry land. Olga Petrovna, who was talking about the Urals, hunted for a kettle, stroked the crimson parrot, tried to clear the table, and talked again:

'Well, *golubushka*, it is grand meeting you. You might have written,' her smile was at once reproach and pardon. 'But I have been hearing things from Kraspole . . . On my way here I stopped in Moscow. Do you know that we have nearly one thousand colleges now, and teaching is carried on in seventy-five languages? I wept when I heard it. You would have cried if you had known the old darkness.' She found the kettle in among a heap of underwear and went on triumphantly. 'They say I am going to have a new caravan sled. I am mobile,' she explained to Gleb. 'Next winter it is Karelia, I think.' She looked about for a spoon, could not find

one, and shook the tea out rather recklessly. 'What days these are! Everything is being done for the children—as it should be, bless them, life's only flowers.'

Dasha, trying to find a plate and some cutlery in a corner full of books and papers, wished she might tell Olga Petrovna about Gleb—with hungry rats for companions and snow mounds for sanctuaries, Gleb, whose most impressionable years had been fretted by want and frost and darkness, above all, by the sapping sense of being unwanted in a world of unhappy, frightened men and women preoccupied with the unsatisfied demands of starved, aching and weary flesh. 'I shall tell her some day,' she thought fierily, 'he rose from that grave . . .' But speak she dared not, and Olga Petrovna flustered on:

'You need not blush, *milochka*, nor tell me anything about yourself. I have heard about "Friendship" from Petrov in Moscow. Do you remember carving that funny little goose and telling me it was no goose at all?' She pushed a plate of cold boiled potatoes and some eggs, baked in their shells, towards Gleb. 'Eat, young man,' she encouraged him, 'here are some herrings, and we can have raspberry jam in our tea.' Dasha was eating her herring, but she pushed a piece of somewhat dusty chocolate on her plate. 'Eat, *dushenka*, you look slightly mad today, I must say. Well, spring gets into everybody's blood. Young man, you ought to be proud of her for all she is a foolish little piece sometimes, and will say that a goose is a water-can or a cabbage . . .'

Dasha could hardly see her plate, and the herring became a large oblong of gold-brown dust. She felt as if her heart had been taken out, put into a startling red frame, and hung on a wall for everybody to see and to mock at. But she felt no resentment towards Olga Petrovna.

'Eat your herring,' she heard Gleb's impersonal voice. 'Me? No, I am no artist. If I could understand children, I would teach in some elementary school. But I love children—and that is all,' he shook his head at another herring. 'No, no, they are far more than flowers of life. Flowers can be a luxury. Children are not.' He began speak-

ing very fast as if he were pursuing a beloved and fugitive shadow across a field. 'A man I know married some five years ago, and his wife will not have a child. She is a ballet dancer, very healthy and strong, but she thinks a child would be a terrible encumbrance. Once I said to her "Irina Antonovna, it is almost criminal—married life without a child is like soup without bread!" We need them so, the children,' and from her corner, Dasha wondered about Olga Petrovna's suddenly crumpled-up face as if she were looking at a fully opened flower being broken by a hand she could not stay.

'Yes, we do need them,' she echoed in a buttoned-up voice.

'And if I had my way, I would gather them all together. There are still so many dim patches left. You have read Saltykov. You remember Pogorelka, a sad-looking manor he called it, an estate without a garden, not even a flower-bed in front of a house, and it was one-storied, and looked crushed, and endless fields ringed it everywhere, mud in the summer and snow in winter, not a tree to break the horizon. Life was a candle without its wick to those people.'

'Pogorelka was a manor,' retorted Olga Petrovna, 'I was not thinking of manors. Some homesteads are still so poor that you would not find a blackbeetle there. Look you, in a village behind the Urals I found a man, his wife, mother, seven children, a thin grey limpet of an aunt, all living together in a hovel. There was not even a door—you crawled in through the cowshed. They slept on top of the brick oven, and for furniture you had a table and a dirty wooden dais below the oven. The pig and her litter lived under the dais. I remember one small window—they would stuff it with rags and seal it with pitch all through the winter. What air they had came through the cowshed. I broke bread with them, *grecha* in flax seed oil. We had a spoon each and shared the bowl, and the pig and poultry all tumbled together under the table.'

'But, surely, there are not many such left?'

'Well, a few,' Olga Petrovna was gruff. 'The Russian yard is too vast for all the brooms to reach the corners all at once. Yet I was glad I met that woman in the cowshed. I had a tiny cinema in the

caravan, and showed them a Caucasian travel reel in technicolour. It was worth all the discomfort of getting there just to watch their faces. Later the woman said: "I thought you could see such lovely things only when you were asleep." I nearly gave the cinema to her, but nobody would have known how to work it. Well, five or six hours' journey from that bear's den I came on a properly run *Kolhoz*, no woman there tied to the day's drudgery. I had a lot to say about the bear's den. Some there were who did not savour my words. But I did not care: my job is with the peasantry, and a blunt knife is no good for cutting thick leather.' She got up, and the smile redeemed some of her fussiness. 'Now then, I am sorry—but I must run off to Smolny now. Bow for me to all the friends at Kraspole, Dasha . . .' she laughed. 'You may see me again. Tell Lev Kirillich I would like a nice brown monkey, he might make it of cloth or something. My parrot is lonely sometimes. They might play together when I am not there.' She hustled them away.

Outside Gleb said:

'We might catch that train if we hurry,' he measured her with a glance, 'why, you are blessed in your friends . . .'

They went to Baltisky Station. Dasha dared not thank him.

4

It was the smell of lilac in full bloom that gave old Barina her insomnia, so she thought. Memories of vanished, more gaily coloured times crowded into her mind with that fragrance stealing about the room, and she saw bleakness in the present hour and roughly edged uncertainties in the future, and how could she sleep with an aching, unquiet mind? She felt afraid, she roused Valia, told her to draw curtains, to stay with her and tell stories.

'Any silly fables you can think of. But, please, stay in my room. You are young, you should not feel tired.' Barina's shabby nightgown clung to her small withered body, she sat up on the tumbled bed, her head flung back on a tall pile of pillows, and grumbled:

'You might do that much for me. I was sorry for you when nobody considered you at all, not even your tiresome relations in the North, and now I suppose that, having learnt carving, you think the place is too small for your boots, and you would leave an old woman to die here by herself. Why, Valia, I taught you everything. When you first came, you could not even use a broom properly. And you might never have met Lev Kirillich if it were not for me. But I know that gratitude is as common as an Easter egg at Christmas.'

Valia drew the thick blue curtains, lit two candles, hugged her faded purple dressing-gown, and sat down on a stool by the grey porcelain stove. She told the simple folklore stories, her pale eyes wandering up and down the candle-lit room. Sometimes she looked at Barina and her lips curved into a smile, and her eyes had much kindness in them as though she found great pleasure in sitting on a low hard stool after a day's hard work. Sometimes Barina fell asleep, listening, her mouth slightly open, her wispy iron-grey hair shadowy against the white tumble of her several pillows, and Valia would then blow out the candles and tip-toe out of the room.

But one night Barina stayed stubbornly wakeful. Valia had told the story of the goldfish, the ambitious crow, the turnip, the fox on the ice, and Vasilissa the orphan. She stopped.

'Go on. You must know many others. Tell me the story of Prince Bova.'

'No,' Valia said gently, 'I am sorry, Barina, but I feel tired tonight.'

'Why should you? You are young. It is rest day tomorrow, and anyway your work is very easy at the Golden Cockerel,' Barina stared at her blue-veined hands and added, 'You did one or two clever things, Valia, but you are not like Dasha. You never could be. You are just a craftswoman like the rest of us, and we all think the same about you,' she lied nonchalantly.

Valia stayed as quiet as though she had not heard. Her hands were folded. Her head, leaning against the pale-grey stove, she looked as

though she were moulded out of wax by someone who, having given her shape, hesitated about the expression on the face, and ended by giving none at all.

She had forgotten to close the window. A breeze stirred the blue curtains, and one of the candles died with a faintly threatening hiss. The room went dimmer. The other candlestick stood on a flimsy bamboo whatnot close by the stove. Valia's thin face was in half shadow, pale and grave, occupied with an intent known to herself alone, remote from the wind, candles, and blue curtains.

'Close the window,' Barina said crossly, 'the night is far too chilly for my bones. That lilac has a curse on it. Close the window and light that candle again. Do you hear me, Valia?'

'The night is quite warm, Barina. If you walked in the garden in your shift, you could come to no harm.'

'What is the matter with you? Oh yes, I know. But words need not bite, and old women should be forgiven for talking nonsense . . . And I have been good to you. Close the window.'

Slowly Valia got up, trimmed the dead candle, relit it, and placed it on the whatnot well away from the window.

'It is a warm night,' she said again in a dry voice. 'You need fresh air, Barina. It is your fear that makes you feel chilly. Yes, Barina, you are afraid of me.'

'Have you got hay in your head?' snapped Barina, 'why should I be afraid of you?'

Valia did not answer at once. She stayed by the whatnot, stumpy and misshapen in her shoddy purple dressing-gown.

'You are afraid of me . . .' she moved to the door, then turned, and smiled towards the bed, 'but you need not be. Not just yet . . . And you would sleep more comfortably, Barina, if you had not got so many pillows under your head.' She closed the door slowly, quietly.

Old Barina struggled to her feet, locked the door, and shuttered the window. She was so cold that even two shawls could not warm her, and she spent the night in a vigil, listening for the least sound behind the door. But the little house was sunk in quiet within and

without. Towards the morning she drowsed, huddled among her pillows.

She woke, unbolted the shutters, greedily taking in the comforting ordinariness of the cool morning scene. Her trees and flowers were there, and even the lilac no longer annoyed her. She watched some sparrows fighting over a worm, but the night's fear had not altogether left her, and the knock on the door startled her so much that her small face went all beaded with sweat. She must open the door, but her shaking fingers could hardly master the key.

Valia stood there, the morning light making her look also ordinary and almost defenceless. She wore a blue-grey overall, her head tied with a gay orange handkerchief. She carried a tray with tea, two *vatrushki*, and some glossy *baranki* covered with poppy seeds. Barina glanced at the tray and knew herself to be famished. She waited for Valia to bring it in and place it on the table, and then screamed in a thin wire of a voice:

'Now you get out of the house, you devil's daughter. Go, go . . .'
Valia looked so ordinary, and the morning, richly washed in sunlight, was gradually turning Barina's terror into dust, things all seemed new and open, no secretiveness lurked in the bright room, and good food was waiting for her. 'Go,' she repeated in the same taut voice, 'else I shall tell the militia.'

'But you can't turn me out, Barina. There is a month's notice, and I have your signature. I have stolen nothing. I have done the work.'

'You shall go today.'

Valia looked down at the tray, rearranged a spoon or two, and sighed deeply.

'Well, perhaps I had better go to the militia as well. Do you remember that embroidered blouse, Barina? The American woman ordered it, and you were not well—it was more than two years ago—so I did the work. You gave me twenty-five roubles, I bought a pair of shoes, and I had six roubles left for *gostinetz*, apricot paste and chocolate I bought for *gostinetz*, Barina, and I was so pleased. But you were also pleased. You had enough money left for two

pairs of shoes, and the law says that nobody must exploit another's work, doesn't it?' She smoothed a crease on the pink tray-cloth. 'You can correct me if I am wrong, Barina, you must know the law better than I do.'

'Go,' whispered the old woman. 'I shall think about it. No, of course, you have never stolen anything. I am not feeling well. I want my tea.'

Alone, the door locked again, she shivered in the warm sunlight. The girl was right. The embroidered blouse did not matter, there were no proofs, but what could she, Barina, tell the militia? How could she explain the wind, the smile, the dying candle, the cold which was not in the room at all. They would laugh at her for the fool she was.

'Perhaps I am a fool,' reflected Barina. 'I must not wake her up any more or annoy her too much. I am too old to live alone. She is good at her work.' Barina poured out her second cup of tea, 'And when one is old, such fancies creep into the mind that a plate might look like a toad . . .' and she felt quieter, comforted by the soft gold-brown *vatrushki* with their rich coverlet of sour cream.

Since that day in Leningrad, Dasha thought that every morning was a door closed upon something small and yet significant—a word, gesture, or look, with enough magic in them to drown the world in the cup of their splendour. She would wake, waiting, but the day's door, when opened, revealed but another familiar stretch of usual occupations. The work at the Golden Cockerel, having shed its earlier feverish rhythm, continued pleasantly and ordinarily. Her friends were glad of her. But nothing happened. Nobody wrote from Moscow about the possible fate of 'Friendship'. The Academy of Art in Leningrad kept silent. Nothing happened except that at No. 47 the tension grew, the loosely spun tissue of its everyday life, embroidered with the common thread of common small-scaled interests, was being tautened, stretched out upon a frame which did not fit it. In her back bedroom, the green satin curtains flung wide apart to let in wind and starlight, and the

nostalgic scent of lilac, Dasha often lay awake, wondering at the halved house within her.

No. 47 had at the very beginning intruded upon her inner kingdom, and for a time she had repelled the invasion, but once again the irritating cadences of its monotonous theme beat against her mind. The day's most trivial happenings, a mislaid button, a burnt bun, or a fly in the honey jar, were all exalted to the dignity of chronicled entries, were told and retold with a maddening profusion of infinitesimal detail and repetition. Her intimates never came to No. 47. She knew she would have recoiled from seeing Gleb measure her against that over-furnished background. The people who climbed the three wooden steps to the door were of the same pattern as the host. Anna Trofimovna was glad of them as patient listeners, gave them tea and abundant food, and Nil Ilyich stroked his bristling glossy moustache, puffed his pink cheeks, and spoke his appointed, often rehearsed, phrases. The guests listened in pitcously obvious awe, and he smiled at their upturned faces:

'We want more steel. We shall get it.'

'Ah yes, as you say, the purge, but we can't have too much integrity in the party, and I would mete out supreme penalty to anyone guilty of the least act of sabotage.'

'Oh no, Nina Semenovna, I assure you—we of the Food Trust know how to carry out our responsibilities.'

The women ate gingerbread and buns, drank scented tea, and knew themselves privileged in a special way. Anna Trofimovna beamed, half-hidden by the full-bellied copper samovar, and importance glided all over the over-furnished parlour.

'Why would you not come in?' he asked Dasha once, meeting her in the hall. 'There was caviare for tea.'

'No, thank you, I have eaten at the Red Samovar . . .'

'Ah yes, the Red Samovar. I hope your work is going on well?'

'Yes, thank you.'

In her room Dasha for the first time grew acquainted with hatred, not the swift, arrow-like hatred of her younger hours, dark and bitter enough for a few troubled instants. Now she was learning

about a different hatred, dark and bitter also, but shapen heavily, a thing which refused to recognise boundaries in instants, or the redeeming background of quick anger for its background. The new hatred was a cloak smothering her thought, and the small room grew smaller: two were now living in it, she had taken that hatred for a room-mate.

Nil Ilyich had once disapproved, nagged and censured her. For a time he took pleasure in bullying her as though her hot-tempered reaction yielded him pleasure he could not find elsewhere. But gradually, ever since she had finished 'Friendship', his manners took to wearing finer clothing as if he were determined to prove to her that he had conceded her any possible future importance she might win. But he had no subtlety. Sometimes, at a meal, Dasha would catch him looking at her, and his stare left her disturbed and ashamed. She began finding odd things left in her room—a pair of wash-leather gloves, some pungently-scented French soap, an embroidered handkerchief from some expensive Moscow store. She carried them back to the parlour or else left them negligently on a table in the hall, and it annoyed her that he took no notice of her refusals to accept the gifts. At last she spoke firmly:

'I found this little bag in my room last night. I left it on the table. Please take it back. I want no presents from you.'

Anna Trofimovna was out. He sat at the table, and his fat face went a nervous spotty red, he crumbled his bread, his heavy lips shook, and he stuttered:

'If you would only look at me kindly. I used not to be fair to you, but you can forgive it. I could be so nice to you . . . Why will you see an enemy in me, Dasha, Dashenka? Has nobody ever told you how attractive you are?' Crumbs sticking to his fat fingers, he tried to reach for her hand. Dasha wrenched it away, looked at him, and laughed:

'And has nobody ever told you what a fool you are?'

She waited, and saw his hand curve into an ugly fist. His breath came jerkily. He said nothing. He left the room in silence, his importance clinging to him like an embroidered cotton cloak on

a second-rate clown. Dasha stared at the crumpled napkin, the bread-crumbs on the table-cloth. She could still see that hairy podgy hand stretched across the table, the oily appeal in the small mean eyes, and she drank a glass of cold water, and laughed, aware that never again would he be able to harm her. The sharp rapier of one brief word, *durak*, had done its work.

The incident had not disturbed Dasha as it might have done because her mind was occupied most happily: once again she was working hard on a small figurine of a countrywoman in kerchief and apron, kneeling, a sheaf of corn in her arms. The figure was almost primitive in its severity, but in the line of the slightly bent shoulders, the curved forearm, the bent face, there were hunger and weariness mingled with something like joy. Frossia said:

'You have made her bend not because she is gathering corn but because she wants to be closer to the earth. It is an acknowledgment of something changeless and primeval. Call it "Rye".'

'I shall,' cried Dasha, 'you know you make everything richer than I could ever do—because you understand,' and she carried 'Rye' to No. 47, and hid it in the chest in her room.

A week had gone by, and Nil Ilyich had not spoken to her. The word she had flung at him hung, a thick curtain between them. She knew that Anna Trofimovna was perplexed. But Anna Trofimovna dared ask no questions. Now 'Rye' was finished, Dasha again felt rich and widened, and that day she even smiled at Nil Ilyich and offered him bread across the table. Anna Trofimovna's cheek went pink. Nil Ilyich answered by a formal little bow.

Next day Dasha came back to find No. 47 quiet and empty. Both Anna Trofimovna and Nil Ilyich had gone to a wedding at the other end of Kraspole. Dasha laughed at the heavily laden boughs of lilac. She wished she might fill the house with them, but remembered that Nil Ilyich refused to have flowers in the rooms. 'They always fade so quickly and make things untidy.' However, she plucked a branch and carried it indoors, gladly aware that the house belonged to her wholly for the space of a few hours. She sang, rummaging for food in the tiny kitchen, then ran into her

bedroom to shed her paint-smeared overall, and stopped in the doorway.

The green satin counterpane was strewn with pieces of palely coloured wood. She came nearer, and knew that she was looking at 'Rye' hacked into countless pieces. She picked up one of the fragments, and anger rose to such a height that her whole body burnt with it. She ran to the bathroom. The water ran icily cold. She wrenched her body free of clothes, leapt into the large tin tub, and the cold water almost scorched her. Her wrath fell from its red pillared heights to give room to contempt and the gnawing sense of a great hurt.

Her possessions were so few that it took her less than ten minutes to gather them together. The little room, appointed with such an incongruous elegance, stirred no regret in her. She glanced at it casually, and ran down the three wooden steps.

Frossia and Igor were at home, and both would have listened at once, but wrath, contempt, and hurt, all were knotted up together in Dasha, and once again she was a small defenceless cripple robbed of both sunlight and oranges. Her bundles on the floor, she cried until all strength ebbed from her. It was some time before she could bring out the story. She never mentioned the scene in the dining-room . . .

Frossia, her mouth set, stared at the pieces of pale wood in Dasha's hands. Igor said quietly:

'You shall stay here until you go to Leningrad.'

'Yes, yes,' sobbed Dasha, 'but it is mother . . . How can she live there, be married to him?'

'Stop it.' Frossia spoke so brusquely that Dasha stared at her. 'Your mother was young once, and what had she of youth? And now she is tired and blunted, and, of course, she will refuse everything except her own comfort, and he gives it to her. There are crowds of such people in Russia. They are just tired out. One can't despise them. I used to be so impatient with other people's weariness,' and suddenly she smiled, all her vehemence gone in compassion, 'though I do understand . . .'

'And "Rye",' stammered Dasha, 'when I saw it on the bed, a door slammed somewhere. It will always stay shut . . .'

'If you were not so miserable, I think I would shake you. Of course, a door slammed. How could it be otherwise when you wished it to slam? And it will open again when you are quiet. What is in you can't die because of an old man's petty frenzy.'

Surprisingly Dasha slept that night. She woke to a grey morning, heavy tears of rain hammering down the window, and she saw Frossia at the door.

'Let us be quiet. I don't want to wake Igor. It is quite early. Your mother has just been. She is unhappy and perplexed, but I think she is trying to understand. Anyway, she seems to accept your staying here. But, Dasha, something else has happened—Valia killed old Barina in the night . . .'

Dasha pushed the hair off her face.

'That was why she smiled at everybody . . .'

The rain went on beating against the dim glass, but the window stood closed, and the rain gave no kiss to her cold upturned face.

5

Praskovia wrote to Frossia from Leningrad.

' . . . That murder was ghastly. Dostoevsky's types were indeed taken from life. Barina (what an odious nickname) may have been an encumbrance, there are many such, but I can't in the least admit that the girl is insane. The lust to strangle people is a disease, not necessarily insanity, and even in such a small, walled-in community as yours, doors can stay locked and windows curtained, and nobody need interfere with their neighbour's intimacies. For all any of you know, the old woman may have been sadistic. Dasha's problem is much more urgent. Obviously, she must come here, she need not wait for the autumn term to begin, and she must work. I feel that something must have happened to her—apart from the smashed figurine and the murder, but you don't give me any clues. I have

tried to discuss it with Vassia, but you know what it has been like all these years: the darling has finished his last treatise, is having a month's holiday, and has no time for anything except detective novels. Therefore I must wait for him to start his work again: when feverishly busy, weary, and bothered by the whole world, he will have ample time for any problem. I suggest that Dasha comes to Leningrad. I will find her a perch. Here I could not have her: the place is too noisy for anyone with jagged nerves . . . Vassia's secretary is still here. She looks a sorry imitation of a cheap fashion plate, but her work is quite competent. Our dislike of each other is mutual and hearty. I have little use for young cows sporting a horse's harness . . .'

Frossia took the letter to Igor.

'That is all we can do. Frossia, *dushenka*, you will grow old without learning that people can't be helped against their will.'

'But she has the will somewhere,' insisted Frossia, 'I might have understood it better if she had run away to Leningrad or the Crimea.'

'She must be left alone. I would feel troubled if she were the same, but she is not. She is silent, she avoids us all, she won't face the streets or meet anyone. All of it is natural. She is growing, Frossia, she was very much hurt. Anyone's growing must be left alone . . .'

Since that grey April morning Dasha had walked her own way, a path cut through a thick forest where the old trees interbranched so closely that not a hint of sunlight fell on the dark brown soil. Such were her days, she kept telling herself, she must walk that path alone, and at the end of it she might or might not come to the light falling on the twisted secret of Valia's smile, or the cobweb-hung purpose in an old man's mind, and the no less disconcerting riddle of the frenzy which had hacked her 'R-ye' to pieces. Meanwhile she lived among apple-trees in blossom, did a few chores, kept to her room, and sought the garden in the evening. Of the students' hostel she dared not think too much.

No. 47 stood quiet, big official seals splashing their scarlet across

the green paint of the door. Anna Trofimovna was lodging with a railwayman's widow in a hut behind the station.

The upheaval, caused by the murder, dwarfed all other happenings. Someone in Moscow had taken sudden interest in the Food Trust office of Kraspole. Tins of salmon and shellfish, expensive foreign soap, and a crowd of other trifles were abruptly flung into daylight. Nil Ilyich was relieved of his post, and summoned to Moscow there to explain his inordinate passion for salmon and French *pâté de foie gras*. Anna Trofimovna, battered by the disaster into shrivelled old age, called at Frossia's cottage. She stood in the doorway, the hot sun showing small mercy to her darned grey shawl, her ungloved hands, untidy hair, and unpainted face streaked by tears and ravaged by anxiety. She stood in the doorway, repentant and plaintive, and Dasha must needs lead her to the room where Igor sat by the yellow-curtained window, a Braille Pushkin on his knees. But Anna Trofimovna said nothing to Igor.

'Dashenka,' her voice cringed, pleaded, and swept the very dust off the floor with its humility, 'I had to come . . . I know what Nil Ilyich did to you. You must forgive him . . . An angry man's hands would do anything. And he is a broken man now,' she breathed hard, a weight of iron was pressing on her, and her redd-lidded eyes blinked in the sunlight. 'Think only—he is in such trouble, and he is innocent, and you must not be hard on him. He stood to you in your father's place, Dashenka. It is a sin to hate him . . .' she faltered and glanced towards the window, but Igor's grey head was bent, he did not seem to be in the room at all, and Anna Trofimovna sighed, conscious of her isolation, 'it is a sin to hate him, Dashenka.'

Then Dasha laughed, and Anna Trofimovna's tear-stained face mirrored bewilderment as though she had heard an obscene song at vespers. Igor raised his head. Dasha was laughing with her mouth. Her eyes stayed hard.

'A great sin, mama? Yes, a sin indeed—but at his door, not mine. Would my own father have soiled me with such slimy looks? Would my own father have wanted me to do what that man did?

All the slimy looks . . . And more . . . You did not know. Perhaps you refused to know. Sin? I have learnt something about it since I left the Crimea. I shall never forgive him. When you forgive, you must forget, and how could I forget? It is like a burning brand pressed against the lips. Sin to hate him, you say? It would be sin to cease from hating him,' she stopped, her eyes so hard that Anna Trofimovna knew all words were useless, and she rose from her chair by the door. Her face shrunken, her shoulders sagging, she looked as though she were bound to a rack. Her left hand sketched a meaningless little gesture, her grey lips opened but no sound came from them and, head bent, she shuffled out of the room.

The door closed upon her. The room stayed quiet. The bitter tumult of Dasha's words were silenced. Through the open window came the breath of honeysuckle and jasmine. The hot sun lay upon the grass and the small flower-beds Frossia had planted. Yet the dim room and the gaily coloured scene outside were in two different worlds. Dasha swayed and groped to a stool. For her there was no quiet in the room: her own words came back, they were so many flails, she knew she would not unsay them, but they came back to hurt her, and Igor kept still.

'If only he would move, say something, be angry with me,' she thought, watching that immobile shadow by the yellow curtain. 'He seems almost dead in his quiet,' but she waited, not daring to speak herself, and at last she heard him say:

'Why didn't you come to me or to Frossia? Why did you imagine that you could carry such a burden all alone? Child, you have too much pride and also selfishness.' His gentleness now hurt Dasha even more than the flails of remembered words.

There fell a pause. The scene he had witnessed left his thoughts all tangled, and he must unravel them slowly, skein by skein:

'Pride and selfishness . . . You came here with your broken "Rye", yourself broken. I don't wonder at it. But you were bound to stumble, keeping it all to yourself. You are not strong enough, Dasha, it is your pride that makes you imagine yourself possessed of much strength. Anyone would have stumbled under such a

burden. Now it has all come out—in such an ugly way—and to what purpose? To hurt a woman, your own mother, crushed by her own grief. Dasha, you can never, never pay cruelty with cruelty . . .’

‘I could not help it,’ she cried childishly. ‘All the time I spent under their roof, what joy had I of them? I would have been happy enough if I had gone into their cage, become jam-minded, cake-minded, accepted that clerk’s job. How could I have lived in such a way? She was my mother, she should have seen it . . . And she would not,’ she stopped, expecting him to stem her anger, but he stayed silent, and she stumbled over her words. ‘Igor Vladimirovich, I know you are right—I was stupid and cruel. But I could not help it. I have lived with hatred too long, and hatred grows and spreads like mildew on a damp wall, and all of you gets soiled.’

‘I know. But what you have done has soiled you even more. Dasha, I am getting old. I know my nation, all of us are cruel in Russia, perhaps, we can’t help it, but we can bury it down, never let it come out. It is worse than mildew. You can wipe off the mildew. Hatred and cruelty are like canker, they eat into you. And you have so much, some day you will have more. Your mother has had everything taken from her. She came here, a beggar, and you have beggared her even more. She will forgive. She has it in her to forgive. But your words will slash at you and cripple you and darken many an hour for you. Any hard word is a knife, Dasha, a knife that slips in your own hand and hurts it. Yes, I can read your thought: “he is preaching at me . . .” I am not.’

She said nothing. She felt no remorse, no desire to run to the tiny hut behind the station, there to try and unsay the bitter scourges of her words, but a new unquiet stirred in her, and a sense of peril also as if, walking along some lonely path in a wood, she suddenly realised that all the trees were enemies, that she must get away from them, but her feet were tethered, she could not run, and the peril grew nearer and nearer.

‘Now you are silent. But I can feel that you are not quiet. And you must have quiet to be at all. The quiet Frossia has. When you

were a tiny cripple and I first knew her, life was noisy and horrible at times, it hurt her, and she also lost that quiet for a time, but in the end she learnt that both noise and horror were just the mere circumstance in life, something else lay underneath the untidy, hurting level. Some day you will learn it, too,' he raised his head, 'no, don't say anything. I want no words. I heard you move a minute ago. No, no, say nothing,' his voice was almost urgent now. 'Go out, be alone, get quiet . . . go out,' he insisted, and she moved to the door in silence.

It was hot, Dubovaya lay almost languishing, the very leaves of the elms looked dusty and tired, and Dasha wandered far away, past houses and shops, past the absurd green station and the gaily painted shutters of the Red Samovar, down a deserted lane where at the end of a field she saw a thin spiral of smoke rise from the chimney of a roughly timbered shack. The day was swathed in heat, no wind stole across the parched face of the field, and the smoke rose, a steady gold-grey pillar in a world of deeper gold haze. She knew it was 'Tambov', she had been there once before, and 'Tambov' made her think of the hostel and Gleb and Kirill. She had cloistered herself so foolishly, she had no wish to meet any of them, yet she went towards the shack, and saw Trofim standing in the tumble-down doorway.

He was baking bread, the small room was hot, but the rich fragrance of new rye loaves reminded her of hunger. Trofim fetched a small bench, brought a generous slice of moist steaming bread and some milk in a bright pink mug.

'Sit. Eat. You will feel easier.'

'How do you know?' she stammered.

'The way you walked across the field. Anyone's gait can be a Judas sometimes.'

She looked at him, huge and gentle, sweat on his tanned face, his rough grey shirt unbuttoned, his cotton *portki* creased and stained at the knees, his enormous feet bare. She looked at him, well aware that she did not know him at all, and yet at that moment he stood closest of all people to her. She ate and drank, and said shyly:

'But you are so busy—'

'You have not begun your business yet,' he said, staring at the lonely parched field. 'Nikolai goes to the hostel pretty often. He has not seen you for a long while, and all the others wonder—'

'I have been nowhere. I have met nobody.'

'Child,' he said, still looking away from her, 'I went to the market this morning, and there was a tiny bird in a cage, and instead of singing, the only noise he made was with his wings beating against the bars, and the woman who was selling him said he was a singing bird, but nobody would believe her. And I had no money to buy him and let him go.'

Dasha started uneasily. Simple things were her neighbours: the dry grass of the field, the rough bench, the smell of fresh bread, and Trofim in his stained cotton clothes. Trofim who had just baked the bread. Something struck at the rigidity within her so that the words she used might have been spoken by a child so open and uncoloured was their simplicity. She felt neither shame nor remorse in the telling, but a breath of grief came over her as if that very morning she had been given a clean white dress, and her own clumsiness had left it covered with stains which need not have been there at all. When she had done, she thought he would speak, but he sat still, huge calloused hands between his knees, his shaggy head bent forward a little, and she had a feeling that he was still listening even though she had finished. Shyly she waited, and then asked for more milk, and Trofim refilled the pink mug.

'Some folk are so dim-minded that they would not see the sun falling from the skies, and it is not their fault,' he said suddenly, and measured her with a look of such gratitude that Dasha faltered:

'Trofim, why do you thank me so?'

'For teaching me,' he said simply, 'there is hatred which is born of the night, and is glad of itself, and lives in the dark for eternity. And there is also hatred of a different kind, shameful, maybe, but born under the noontide sun. It burns so fiercely that it soon comes to embers, and there is good sorrow in the ashes, and that is *your*

hatred. *Khristos prostit*, Christ will forgive,' he added, and rose, the empty mug in his huge hands.

Dasha went back across the scorched field. She walked quietly, her eyes on the grey-brown ground.

chapter five

AND THE ARROW ANSWERED

I

IT proved a memorable summer for Kraspole. There had been enough stir over a murder and an important arrest, and now they were having a great youth rally, and in the park the green grass vanished under the grey-brown canvas of numberless tents. In the hot evenings the dark was garlanded with the flaming flowers of camp fires, and several fields behind the station were given over to hundreds of delegates. Dubovaya shone green and scarlet, streamers and banners interwoven with the boughs of old oaks. The windows of the Co-operative store, the station, the concert hall, the Red Samovar, even the modest ochre-painted communal laundry, each and all carried loudly coloured posters praising youth for being young and urging them to greater fitness and effort. Kraspole was flushed with pride, streets and shops breathed geniality. Strangers met at the Red Samovar, smiled at one another, and broke into conversation:

'Not even in Leningrad could they find such space as here,' and nobody reminded them that in earlier years such rallies had been held in Leningrad and one even at Ferdino, Kraspole's twin, some twelve odd miles to the west. But Ferdino was never mentioned at Kraspole.

The open-air amusement centre became the central point for everybody. From that enormous, hurriedly timbered platform would come the speeches and the songs, from there the young guests would see the red and grey tumble of Kraspole roofs, the gilt spire of the cathedral, the pale-blue domes of the Ascension church, the regal reaches of the park, and the proud pale massif of Rastrelli's

palace. Crowds surged to the edge of the open space, watching the erection of red and white striped posts round the platform. It was hot, they were all tired and thirsty, but they stood and watched. From a corner of the field the loud speaker flung its thornily edged fragments of the day's news. There were important visits to Munich, and a great tension in Europe, and nobody could read Hitler's mind. But Kraspole, watching the erection of posts and platforms, was occupied with the rally, and left Hitler alone.

Two workmen unrolled and ran up a strip of white linen, and the gigantic crimson letters burned in the sun, '*Molodezh zhaschitit nashe otechestvo*,' 'Youth shall defend our fatherland', and the crowds clapped, and wept, and clapped again.

'Say what you like—but none of us will ever abandon the country. Take me, I am an engineer, I have no interest in politics, but that is not a slogan they have stuck on the poles, it is a trumpet,' and a fat bearded man waved his straw hat towards the crimson letters, and wept.

'Well, I hope some foreigners will come to Kraspole. Let them see what our youth is like. We seem prepared at any rate . . .'

'And nobody has ever conquered Russia—except the Tartars.'

'Yes, we have had some grand generals, Suvorov, Kutuzov, Gurko, Brusilov—'

'What? Brusilov? He was a White guardsman.'

'To hell with you! He was a good soldier!'

The loudly festive mood of Kraspole touched no chord in Dasha. She meant to go to the rally since the day's glad tumult could not be altogether escaped even at the farthest end of Dubovaya, but her inner preoccupation lay elsewhere. She had been to the little hut behind the station, but the fat old woman, with a big mole on her left cheek, was as sombre as her dark grey shawl.

'Why should I tell you where Anna Trofimovna is? She would not thank me for telling you. Well, if you want to know, she is in Leningrad. She may come back. She may not,' and the door slammed before Dasha could edge in another question.

She felt in no mood for writing letters. Flails of hot and hurting

words could not be unsaid in a letter. She could not speak either to Igor or Frossia, she merely waited for a miracle to happen and turn her burden into a swan's feather.

Kraspole burned with colour, and ran with song and shout the morning of the rally, and Dasha, watching the crowds surge up and down in the huge amusement centre, thought of dimmer days when a bread queue was the only rally and cries for bread the only song to be heard in the streets, and, suddenly, the days in Maly Prospect came near her so warmly and intimately that she wished Trofim could be there to comfort her and tell her if there were any virtue in her grief. At that moment, at the very edge of the crowd, she saw Anna Trofimovna, a shabby bundle in her arms, standing, very small and humble, her eyes turned towards the far-off platform in its circlet of red and white banners. She looked like a small untidy ball of worsted that a kitten may have played with and left forgotten on some gorgeously tinted rug. Dasha ran.

'Mama, *mamochka*, I went to see Maria Vasilievna. *Mamochka*, *Mamochka* . . .' she had no other words to use, and clung to Anna Trofimovna, her small body motionless as if there were no freedom at all in her limbs; she was a tiny cripple again, seeking her mother, her hungry, plaintive and shadowy mother, but always a mother who could tell small heroic lies about the food she had not eaten and the milk she had never drunk. '*Mamochka*,' cried Dasha, exiling No. 47 and all its cobweb-hung irritants out of her mind, remembering nothing at all except that the bitter words she had shouted were being unsaid, and that her mother knew them to be unsaid. People stared and wondered. From a distance trumpets blared, bugles rang, and a voice boomed across the huge field, but Dasha was alone with her mother, '*Mamochka*,' she kept muttering, and kissed the tired, seamed face again and again.

'There you are, *dushenka*. I meant to come and see you again. I have always said that God is kind when you wait for Him. It was not you talking that day, *Dashenka*, not you at all . . .'

'*Mamochka*, don't, please, don't.'

Kissing and hugging, their faces away from the crowded field, they went down a lane, muttering foolish, broken words, and now Dasha knew what Trofim had meant about the good sorrow of the ashes.

'I heard you were going to Leningrad, Dashenka. I know things will go well with you. I am off to Moscow, *svetik moy*, my little light. Here is the address. With Maria Karpovna by the Arbat. She is a kindly old soul. I have so much important business to do there, but God is kind. Write to me, Dashenka,' her face crumpled up as they came within the sight of the station, 'God is kind enough, but I can't do without your kindness as well.'

'*Mamochka . . .*'

The rest of the day belonged to Dasha, and darkness never fell that evening. She must needs go to the hostel, her mind full of impressions which were like garlands woven from fire and flowers together. She came into the dim room, lips parted, eyes starry, her pink cotton dress stained with crushed grass. Kirill clapped his hands.

'I could almost call you beautiful this evening!'

'Oh don't talk about me! I am full of space . . . I have got the sense of space out of the rally, an unlimited space in which everybody can grow,' her words ran on like strands of a tangled string.

'You must not be romantic,' Kirill rebuked her, 'space . . . You will have to work on the peasant first. He is still befogged by past experiences of droughts, floods, and what not besides. He would not thank you for mere space. These rallies do rouse sentiment,' he complained. 'But bears' dens of villages are still all over the place, and instead of working at them, we go to Pushkin and Suvorov.'

'I want tea,' said Dasha, but nobody gave her tea. Gleb shouted:

'What do you know of the peasant? At least he had and has simplicity. What was sex to a peasant? Something so simple he never thought about it. He knew no pretty words. He looked for a mate—not a portrait on a chocolate box. He wooed his mate, and his wooing was rough and beautiful. He had no dirty corners in his mind even when he was savage. He would not grow lyrical over

a ploughed furrow, the seed he sowed, the corn he reaped. They were there, his wife's body was there. He asked for nothing else, and it was not bondage to him for all his inarticulacy. I always feel the primitive gods of Scythia must have once hallowed it all for him. He thought his Christ walked upon the rye field, but don't ask me if he was ever consciously religious, for I don't know, and what you always forget,' Gleb clenched his fists, and the scar turned a challenging purple, 'is that he took the same simplicity along when he left the country for the factory. I know,' his voice now sank to a weary, disappointed note, 'people often laugh at us or are puzzled by us. God knows man has worried about an ideal society since the days of Plato. That has been worn threadbare, but sometimes, surely, even an ordinary man might catch a glimpse of what had haunted great poets, painters, composers. Yes, Kirill, laugh at me, I go to the poets, then I leave them, and I talk to the milkman, or a railway porter, or a Kolhoz delegate, and they are all different in speech or thought, and I can find something of the same quality in them all and in poets, too.'

'I know,' said Dasha. 'Take squares and circles in any formal design. You can make them together and all so fluid—you can so interweave them that squares will melt into circles.'

'Hear, hear!' shouted Kirill, but Gleb poured out the cold tea.

'Why then are you going to Leningrad?' he turned his back on Kirill and stood facing her, his blue eyes veiled and grave.

'But I can't tell you,' she forgot all about Kirill, they were alone once more, she and Gleb, 'why must a fish have water to swim in? I can't tell you . . .'

2

'We miss Dasha,' Nikolai said heavily, 'that is the chair she used to sit on, always on the edge, and then unbutton her coat very slowly even though the room is always warm. Why have you piled books on that chair?'

'I have no time for you,' muttered Gleb, 'and Kirill is in Moscow. If you stay, you must be silent.'

'I have a meeting,' retorted Nikolai, and ambled away.

Gleb had no leisure for Nikolai. He would not have had much for Kirill. Gleb was hungry for a quiet hour, for something foolish and splendid and also barren. Because of that, thirsting for foolishness and quiet, he left the house, crossed the park, already plunged into darkness, and went towards Dubovaya where street lanterns flung their garlands of dim yellow light upon the pavements already scattered with fallen leaves. Miss Thompson passed him just as the light fell on him, and she recognised him. She watched him stop and look at the shadow flung by No. 47 across the wide street. Miss Thompson saw him stand there, and she went on her own way, memories rather than fatigue hampering her walk.

Back in the hostel, Gleb locked the door, rummaged under his pillow for a slim green-covered note-book, found a few blank pages at the end, and wrote, his scarred hand moving almost angrily over the thin yellowish paper.

'Yet I dare not even begin telling her about it. She, being an artist, will understand the uncreated and the unspoken—because of that I dare not tell her yet. I have not deserved her understanding. Some day I may write a poem about it when all of it will have taken root within me quietly, with the kind of quiet hiding in itself the grace of movement you may not see, not the barren, tiresome quiet of quilt-covered minds, but different, body and soul joined and dedicated to a fulfilment shared by both, and doomed to no aching satiety. She will understand. Because of that I must wait and not overwhelm her. Her symbols are so right that they hurt. She has her reaches of drought, and has the courage to admit that in such days she walks hand in hand with fear lest virtue forsake her altogether.

'I, too, have my own felicity, but if she come to share it, she must accept my agony and not wonder at the two being in one cup. And I must be careful: I have not observed her ways enough, and before I come to her, something must happen to me. I cannot hope to sustain her by beautiful but occasional magic of great words and phrases. Some of my moods must be given different clothing. And

yet even here I am uncertain: will she welcome my mind when it wears its weekday uniform?

'I will say then—not merely with my lips—that at the moment of my going to her, self will lose its tissue, and find some other, and use it nobly without borrowing. I must speak carefully. I am a beggar—outside a jealously barred gate. I must choose my words as carefully as a cunning gem merchant chooses his jewels.

'Perhaps I will say that all things are possible in a garden, walled-in by charity, and yet open to the same world which so often will have hatred for its daily bread. I will speak slowly and prudently of homely and humble things. We will have cane-bortomed chairs, and a pot of white geranium on the window-sill, and pale bare walls for the light to rest on, and no curtains on the windows. I will speak of the same humble things again and again, and even now, unready and hesitant as I am, I know that she will not dismiss my words as an idle repetition and go to watch a copper-haired girl laugh from the screen drenched in impossible shrieking colour.

'I will speak again of homely, humble things, and I will not be offended if someone were to overhear me and to say "Fool, the singing of angels can be heard nowhere except in nurseries and asylums". Then I would say "Is there no other room left? Well, let us turn to children and to those bereft of wit."

'When I have done speaking, I will wait. She may say she prefers pictures to bare walls, and I will not argue. I will wait again until the light she walks by will have taught her to love the stern beauty of a bare wall.

'I have been a niggard with words. I have given her other men's thoughts and cast a cloak over my own.

'I will say that I know we are being watched as we reach unto the perilous heights of the intricate and invariably troubled intent, as we busy ourselves with ether, atom, and molecule. We are being watched. We walk the earth as lords, and we fly the skies as eagles, and we have taken to our use the depths of the sea. We move as proudly as though we were the creators of earth and sky and sea.

'I will say that we are being watched for the stupidity which

is in us, the stupidity of those who mistake the streak of light seen through a door clearance for a June sunrise over Lake Ilmen. Stupidity deserves great pity. Therefore we are being watched lest the same stupidity were to hurl us into the abyss. I will tell her that I believe in the Unbegun Wisdom which alone knows how to measure pity so that it does not hurt or hamper. That pity is healing. Human pity blunts or hurts.

'I will also say "We have denied great things in our smallness, and forgotten small things in our grown stature, and the abiding beauty of proportion may have left us for a while. But pity will redeem both the denial and the forgetfulness."

'Yes, I must speak, I must sing, I must praise because love is too reluctant to let go, is so beautifully stubborn, so royally unashamed of importunity, so triumphant in all apparent defeat, and love has come to my door, and made all the worlds my own, and I know I must cease belonging to myself and cherishing the house I have built for my use where I now live alone with my bliss and my agony. I must bring down the low roof, pull away the narrowing walls. I must widen, widen, widen my habitation. A lodgment, raised for self, would be too small and mean for such a guest.'

3

'Vassia,' Praskovia said for the fourth time, 'I know you hate being worried when you are on holiday, but I can't help it. Frossia says Dasha is coming tomorrow. I have found a room for her, but it won't be vacant for a week. So we must tidy this place. The books could go on the floor, and then Dasha might have the sofa.'

'Yes? Certainly . . . Books on the floor . . . Anywhere . . . There is enough space, isn't there?'

'Vassia, fools would not listen to your lectures if they could see you now. Conscious waste of time is criminal. I could tell you who killed the girl in the green coat—it was the man with the squint, who had scrambled eggs for his dinner.'

'No,' said Vassia, 'she did not wear a green coat, and it was poisoned mushrooms. But, Praskovia, the flat is too small. A week on the sofa? Why, there is Tatiana Markovna's room, and it is big enough.'

'No,' Praskovia frowned, 'and no again. She does your work when you are too busy to notice her. But I see her every day. I dislike fringes,' she re-tied the sash of her orange cotton dress and began clearing the sofa.

Vassia thought of a possible glass of tea. He shuffled into the kitchen. He filled the kettle, splashing cold water over his shabby red slippers. There was no lemon, but he found a piece of nut cake, and his face brightened. 'Now I can take "Death among the Tulips" to Roumiantzev Square, and have cake and lemonade for dinner. It will be quiet and shady there. I might get an ice on the way.' He listened to the slowly deepening singing of the kettle and sat on the small table, dangling his thin legs because he liked doing nothing when he had nothing to do. And then his eyes fell on a fly-blown diary pinned to the wall. In an instant he was back in the living-room, and kicked 'Death among the Tulips' into a corner.

'Praskovia, it is the fifteenth of August today. I am lecturing in Kiev on the eighteenth—'

'Oh, I thought you had cancelled it.'

'The kettle has just boiled. Where are my notes? And Tatiana Markovna?'

'The notes were under a towel in the kitchen. "The fringe" is shopping. We were out of lemons and sausage. She should have got back though.'

Vassia never heard her. He vanished into the tiny place where the taps were, and she smiled, throwing the books back on the sofa. Now, she thought, he would work, crowd every moment of his days, and have enough energy left for every problem from a leaking tap to someone's mental derangement . . .

'We want lemons,' he shouted above the plashing of the water. 'And you might do your hair, *golubushka*. It is nearly twelve, and the train goes at four . . .'

In her room at the back of the huge block Tania sat on the bed, sewing a clean white collar to a flamboyant flowered frock. The table was strewn with packages in rough brown paper. 'They can wait for their lemons and sausage,' she thought sullenly, threading a needle, 'I am a secretary, not an errand girl! I do those things out of politeness. They are not cultured enough to understand.'

Nor could she understand that professorial ménage. Vassia's frayed shirts often lay on the table, his notes on plates cheek by jowl with half-eaten sandwiches and chicken bones. Praskovia interviewed students, her coarse hair tumbling down her thick nape, her body swathed in anything from a dressing-gown to a sofa cover. She worked on the floor, sheets of paper all about her knees, pencil between her lips. She lost things, muddled dates, bought flowers and forgot to give them water, spoke brusquely, and often left questions unanswered. Yet he was important in his world, and she held a professor's chair, and Tania thought:

'A topsy-turvy world indeed. For a rude uncouth peasant like her to have succeeded in such a way . . .' and once she dared and grumbled openly.

'All this silly talk about quality, Professor Dobrina. The peasant diet is still cabbage, salt herring, rye bread, and *kasha*. Yet people with money can go to the Gastronom shops, buy petit-fours, caviare, things in aspic—'

Praskovia stopped her scribbling and looked hard:

'I teach mathematics, Tatiana Markovna. It would be foolish of me to offer history to my students. I suggest you do the same.'

'But I know . . . I met a peasant from Kursk, and he told me. They have not yet got over the famine of 1931.'

'I was not questioning your facts, Tatiana Markovna, and you know it.'

Prudence made Tania stop. It was prudence mingled with a vague disquiet. She was in Leningrad, and could now fill her leisure with calls at many a thickly curtained flat in some of the lonelier streets of the city. She still used the ludicrous passwords, her tremulous voice asserting that 'Niobe had not wept', or that 'the Eagle was

asleep'. She still spent hours in shabby rooms, tenanted by shabby people, and listened to the cobweb-garlanded burden of their grievances:

'I went to the Sickie dining-room today to fetch my dinner, and I read those notices "sit with your hands in front of you", "don't take salt with your fingers, or put your knife into mustard". That much culture learnt in twenty-two years!'

'Yes, Masha had that job at Yalta in the Crimea, and she said all the rest homes in Upper and Lower Massandra were crowded—but not with peasants.'

'Talk of speculation! Paul came back from Kharkov and said they could get you cheese made of moonlight if you paid enough.'

Tania thought of those things and remembered them. Yet it was time to take back the lemons.

She found the flat more turmoiled than ever. Vassia's luggage was piled on the floor, a great pile of books and coats was slung on the sofa, and a bunch of copper-coloured dahlias looked forlorn—stuck into a jug with no water in it. Praskovia was on the telephone:

'I have no speech ready and I have no clothes. All right, all right, but don't expect me to come like a fashion-plate.' She turned, preoccupied, unsmiling. 'At last, Tatiana Markovna! Dr. Gukin wants the lemons. Yes, a friend of mine is coming tomorrow, and I find I must go to Samov's jubilee. Will you stay here till she comes? She may be tired. Please don't talk too much. We shall want fish for tomorrow and some Crimean wine, and I must have an article typed—' here the telephone rang again, Praskovia seized the receiver, and her lips went hard: 'I can't help it,' she said firmly, 'Belova may be clever, but her paper would have disgraced a moribund duckling! All right, take it to the faculty, my own mind is made up—I shall never say that a feather is like a cake of kitchen soap,' she slammed the receiver and panted, 'that is all, Tatiana Markovna. Dr. Gukin is going to Kiev in an hour. You might get his notes together. He made his own tea in the morning—so they may be in the refrigerator.'

'Ringing any bell for the first time is such an adventure,' thought Dasha, luggage at her feet, but she had to ring once, twice, three times before the door opened, and Tania, in an absurd little frock of green taffeta, looked at her, immediately making her conscious of dusty clothes and untidy hair.

'Professor Dobrina,' she asked in a slightly shrivelled voice feeling that the expected adventure was running so far away that she could not follow it at all.

'Yes, she is out. Come in. I am to entertain you,' Tania spoke in a studiously polite voice.

'I think we met before,' Dasha remembered 'Silk slippers for a walk in the snow' and said aloud: 'yes, surely, at Kraspole—you worked in my stepfather's office?'

'I don't remember you,' shrugged Tania, 'but Kraspole was such a crowded place . . .'

The room was tidy and warm, the table set with flowers, some "zakuska" in small white china dishes, and a bottle of wine. But Dasha, having hoped to meet her hostess, felt crushed and disappointed, and Tania's manner made her feel awkward, almost unwanted. The talk was whittled down to a few trivial remarks. The food eaten, Dasha, her weariness notwithstanding, suggested a cinema, but Tania shook her immaculately groomed head.

'All films bore me. Nothing but propaganda in them.'

'It must be interesting to feel bored.'

Tania stared uneasily, but Dasha's face had no mockery in it.

'What an odd thing to say,' carefully Tania took away the half-emptied bottle and put it on a shelf. 'Well, do you like Leningrad? I don't. It has become so provincial. I hope to go to Moscow soon. This place is nothing except factories, and it always rains.'

'Well, I have never worked in a factory, but I like those I have seen. You get such a feeling of onwness there.'

Tania laughed. A wisp of tobacco clung to her scarlet underlip. She wiped it off clumsily, staining her right cheek.

'No,' thought Dasha, 'I was wrong—not a girl in silk slippers any more. Just a clown who had wandered away from the circus.'

lost the way perhaps, and is left out in the cold, a poor, rather frightened monkey of a clown.'

'Ownness . . . What a fanciful word! But I have travelled so much, I know better. Do you think it is any easier to get anything? Why, an electric kettle costs sixty roubles, and a good radio over five hundred.'

'Well, there are loud speakers at so many street corners.'

'Street corners? Yes, it must be pleasant to listen-in at street corners in a blizzard. And take housing . . . Those "corners" they let in Moscow . . . I lived in one of them for a year, with a consumptive woman and her three children—all in one room! Imagine a block of two hundred flats, eight hundred people living in it, and one small kitchen for every ten flats, and they do live in fraternal concord, don't they? Have you ever seen a saucepan, full of boiling water, flying across a kitchen? It does not look pretty when it hits someone. I know you think "she is so excited". Well, perhaps I am, I can't always speak calmly, it touches me deeply, I am a Russian peasant. Imagine what foreigners must think of us. And what do we know of them? The French eat frogs and are very proud of their Maginot Line, and the English are either lords or miners, and they have raw beef for breakfast. How can we get to know more when foreign travel is as good as forbidden? What a life . . .'

'Listen,' said Dasha at last, 'all of it may be true, I can't argue with you, but if you are a peasant, why talk about it as though you were glad of it?'

Tania's thin lips curved into a peculiar line, she clenched her fists, but the door opened, and Praskovia stood there, a green-striped turban swathing her head.

'Well, well, Dasha—from Maly Prospect. I can't remember you—but I know you, every little corner of you. And you need not look at me. I am spent. Those jubilee parties are an inferno . . . I got nothing but a sprat and a glass of lemonade, and the only man I wanted to talk to got hiccups, and I could not get him to listen. Now we must eat. I bought some *koulebiaka* on my way home. I tell you I am spent. I must have five gallons of water and a cigarette.

But I want you to talk all night, we must talk, and I shan't be tired listening. Well, goodnight to you, Tatiana Markovna.'

'You are sudden,' laughed Dasha when the door closed.

'Fringes are always superfluous,' Praskovia shrugged, 'but I trust she fed you.'

'Yes, and she talked. The *Crocodile* office might be glad of her. Such a peculiar sense of humour . . .'

'She is good at hiding it when I am there.'

'I love Frossia, but I think her judgment must have got blunted,' said Praskovia a week later. 'She wrote as though you were a case for Vassia to tackle. You are all right, you seem happy, you are not even afraid of the Academy, and you are so desperately alive that I feel I am a wooden spoon by comparison.'

'Well, they all seem friendly at the Academy, and the work is beginning soon, and I suppose it is just being here.'

'Being here?' Praskovia's mouth opened widely, and she looked like a frog. 'You are not being polite in the manner of the fringe?'

'NO—'

Dasha would never have believed that she could be so much at her ease in an untidy, noisy, cramped flat where nobody troubled about time, where slippers were thrown on pillows and books flung into the bread basket, where a woman worked out her mathematical problems and corrected papers with the wireless blaring and the telephone ringing, and where the whole rhythm of life beat so fiercely . . . Yet Dasha had pleasure in it. When Praskovia's voice and the telephone became too fierce, she paced the streets and quays, angrily washed by torrential rain, and lavishly carpeted with fallen leaves, no longer golden and burning red, but sodden, dark brown, and mottled with dirty stains. She did not resent the rain. She joyed in the wind. She walked, simply aware that all her untutored past notwithstanding, she was not going to make a beggar's beginning at the Academy. She heard encouragement in the wind, and the swollen tumultuous river roared about a wide road soon to open before her—all that because she had had one

letter from Kraspole, written illegibly, nonchalantly, a few hurried lines, possibly scribbled under an extremely flickering oil lamp. She was staring at that brief letter, grown somewhat grey at the edges, one afternoon when Tania came in, wearing a new pale-pink dress. She came in, and Praskovia wrinkled her nose at the scent.

'It is my birthday, Professor Dobrina. There is a party . . .' she blushed, 'would you mind if I did your article tomorrow?'

'I would,' Praskovia spoke without raising her head. 'You have not been very busy since Dr. Gukin went to Kiev. You had better do it now,' she scrambled to her feet and pushed the manuscript into Tania's white-gloved hand, 'do it now,' she said harshly, 'it won't take you more than an hour. Then go to your party, and damn you!' She turned on her heelless slippers and waddled into her bedroom. 'I am unkind,' she thought, staring at her little desk by the narrow bed, 'I am a liar. There was no urgency. But the scent and the white gloves annoyed me too much. She is young and stupid, and such a sham. She is unlike anyone I know. I wanted to box her silly pink ears!' She seized her pen and began writing a letter when suddenly, through the closed door, she heard Tania's voice loud and angry:

'Why should you smile at me? It is all right for you. You have so much, you are going to have more. What have I got? What have I ever had? I am being used as though I were a machine. Yet I have a mind and I can think, and when I speak, people look at me with suspicion as though I were a toad.'

'Why should anyone suspect you? You are not even clever enough for a tart.'

Praskovia flung open the door.

'Dasha, how can you?'

'Well, I could not help it. She kept grunibling so.'

'You need not stay,' Praskovia said to Tania, waited for the door to close on her, and then shook her stumpy fist at Dasha:

'You can be a viper with your tongue,' she laughed. 'You said a true thing—but there is little sense in telling truth to fools.'

'That girl is worse than a fool. She lives in a garden, and prefers to think of it as a garbage heap.'

'Everything seems possible in Russia—even eternal life which so few of us believe in. So it might be possible to see a garden as a garbage heap,' Praskovia looked gloomy. 'Personally I am ready to admit weeds in that garden.'

'What did you say? Few believe in eternal life? Well, I do in a queer way. You must not laugh,' she pleaded, though Praskovia's face stayed grave, 'why, even the making of things is not limited, nor the saying of words. Once, at the Golden Cockerel, I was carving a small horse, and I was working at his head with much attention, and it seemed to me it was going on well, and I suddenly said "Our Father" right to the end, because my heart was so full. I could not think of any other words, and those were near, they satisfied, and never ended somehow, just as though the horse's head and my thought and those words came together, and there seemed neither beginning nor end to them.'

'Dashenka,' Praskovia raised her ill-shaped hands, 'that is not the kind of philosophy I could ever accept, but the way you say it makes a candle glow, and I would like to embrace you,' which she did, and then went back to the bedroom.

The flat was momentarily quiet. But outside on the wide brightly lit landing stood Tania. She felt hurt and unquiet. She wore a dark coat over her pale dress; she stood under an unshaded lamp, and a tenant passed and grinned, but Tania ignored him.

'Not clever enough for a tart . . .' She brushed the words away, and away they went for the deeper disquiet in her. She had lied about a party. She had nowhere to go to. She had put on her rose dress and wasted the scent for the sake of a sudden brief whim. Now the disquiet of the past months ringed her as closely as though she were a napkin neatly folded within a circlet of chased silver. The earlier glow had burnt to tiresome cold ashes. What might have been an adventure ended in a foolish cul-de-sac. Vague hints at the possible return of vanished grandeur, airless rooms, elegant gestures, faultlessly spoken French, even the puzzle of qucerly accented

Russian, obsolete titles, and always talk and more talk, weaving its pathetic tapestry of barren regret and pallid longing on a long since broken loom, and had there been more than that? All of it seemed to her a piece of moth-eaten velvet-edged with rats' tails for ermine. Tania now knew that no real adventure would ever come towards her from that crumbling gateway, and she thirsted for adventure, its hot breath upon her face, the bright torch of the unusual, the fantastic, flooding her paths with its blinding brilliance . . .

She heard measured steps from below, and peered over the banisters. 'Throwing myself down the staircase well might be an adventure, but I shall not be there to enjoy it,' and she waited for two uniformed men to pass her. But they stopped.

'Does Dr. Gukin live here?'

'Yes,' Tania tugged at her pale pink collar, 'I am his secretary. He is in Kiev, but his wife is there.'

She could see their faces under the lamp. They were looking at her. Both were young, clean-cut, handsome, and she curved her lips, but they looked at her as if she had a soiled saucer instead of a face, and her mouth went oddly tense.

'Excuse me,' one of them rang the bell, he spoke very politely. 'Will you come in with us, *Grajdanka* Glebova? We have come to ask a few questions.'

The lamp could not have been very bright. The landing was swathed in mist. Out of the mist a door opened, and she saw Praskovia's face. Out of the mist she heard quiet apologetic voices.

'But it has nothing to do with me. Why am I here at all?' she tried to giggle, 'I don't live here,' and from a far distance, farther than the pit of the well, she heard the same polite voice.

'My father,' she said woodenly, 'was a peasant from Tushino, near Kostroma.'

'We were not asking you about your father, *Grajdanka* Glebova. We know of him. He is dead. He was footman to Prince Darov, but we are not asking you about him.'

In spite of the mist about her and the mist within her, she could see their faces. They still looked at her as though her own face was a

chipped soiled saucer, and she knew that they knew about the ludicrous, puerile passwords, the shabby gallantry, the dimly curtained rooms, where men and women imagined themselves busily spinning a web for a long since broken loom, and that they also knew why some of those men used such oddly broken Russian, heavily broken Russian such as was spoken by the bakers of old Petersburg who sometimes came from Königsberg and elsewhere farther west than the Baltic provinces.

'But it was all talk,' she cried wildly, 'you can't even make an overcoat out of words. Words are air . . . Smoke . . . Yes, yes, just like cigarette smoke . . . That is what words are, comrades, dear, dear comrades . . .' Tania cried, and laughed, and sobbed, and tore at the frail pink collar until the tiny buttons gave way, and the firm rose-coloured flesh of her throat shone in the lamplight. 'Cigar smoke, chimney smoke, that is what words are . . .'

Half an hour later the flat was quiet. Praskovia lay on the sofa, her hair more dishevelled than ever, her thick lips shaking.

'Poor blinded fool!' she kept saying, 'it is incredible. If she had only belonged to them by birth, I would have hated her but understood her. Yet she was a peasant, one of us, one of us, Dashenka. That is not even a problem, it is a tangle, a nightmare . . .'

Dasha slipped the shabby green cover over the typewriter Tania had used.

'Well, I can understand. It is her wandering away that has done it. You can't wander, Praskovia, you must belong somewhere—if not to a nation, or a group, then to yourself. You must be rooted. She did not even belong to herself. She was a clown without a circus.'

4

In Moscow, where Nil Ilyich was in prison, Anna Trofimovna went to lodge with old Maria Karpovna by the Arbat. Maria Karpovna, a railwayman's widow, large, shapeless and voluble, offered sanctuary, abundant board, and much advice. But Anna

Trofimovna had not seen her for many years, and the stories of life at No. 47 made Maria Karpovna shake her grey-shawled head and say gloomily:

'Ania, if it is the truth you are telling me, Nil Ilyich will never see a free road again,' then, seeing Anna Trofimovna's eyes, added hurriedly: 'never mind, God is merciful. Eat another *plushka*.'

Maria Karpovna had two passions: *plushki*, flat spiced buns covered with coarse sugar, and funerals, her twin sister having married an undertaker, 'and they are still in business, *rodimoya moyu*, in Sadovaya. A commissar would not be ashamed to lie in one of Vania's coffins. They are a pleasure to look at.'

Anna Trofimovna ate the *plushki*, and tried to be polite and listen about coffins.

She had not, however, gone on her journey for the sake of sugared buns and funereal conversation. She must venture out, board crowded trams, call at Government offices, and try to receive permission to see Nil Ilyich, and the people she saw were kind enough, if occasionally abrupt, but the city bewildered her. She had forgotten old Moscow, and now it seemed that Moscow had no use for tired, tinid, middle-aged women who came to plead for their husbands at Loubianka. Moscow's life was a leviathan roaring past Anna Trofimovna. The traffic made her tremble, and the streets with their hurrying streams of people looked gorgeous enough, but alien and wholly indifferent to any grief. Yet Anna Trofimovna refused to surrender to fear. The painted woman of No. 47, who had idled behind the copper samovar in a violet *crêpe-de-chine* dress with a becoming neckliure, had vanished. That woman might have shrugged at what indifference the beautiful stones of Moscow flung at her. She was gone, and in her place stood Anna Trofimovna, her anxious scamed face untouched by paint or powder, a thick shawl on her head, and *valenki* on her feet. She went to various government offices, and she was a peasant woman come to plead for her man, and sometimes Maria Karpovna reproved her:

'But you must not bow to them in such a fashion, Ania. That is not done. We are all equals.' Yet Anna Trofimovna shook her

shawled head and thought of Nil Ilyich at Loubianka, and continued her bows.

Maria Karpovna grew gloomier.

'Well, they say the case will be heard in December. And you may see him, but Vania says it is all wrong. You don't even know what they are charging Nil Ilyich with.'

'It is all in a paper, salmon tins, I think—'

'Och,' Maria Karpovna refilled her cup, 'you are simple, Ania. Salmon tins indeed! There must be something else. Perhaps we shall find out. Never mind, *golubushka*, you stay here even if they put off the case. There is enough bread and salt for an old friend,' and she went on conversationally: 'Vania says it will be a hard winter—which is good for the business. Such a coffin I saw in his shop, all lined with yellow, and the pillow edged with lace. For some foreigner, Irina said . . .'

Anna Trofimovna smiled, refused a third *plushka*, and escaped into her room. There she had her own solace which could not be shared with Maria Karpovna. At the bottom of her square wicker basket she kept Dasha's letters. Dasha wrote often. Anna Trofimovna knew that she was living on her own in Leningrad, in a room with its own tiny kitchen and a basin—'all in the wall, *manochka*, very modern and convenient. The room is nearly bare, only a sofa, table and a chair. I keep my clothes in suit-cases, but Professor Dobrina made me a present of a big crimson shawl to cover the sofa, and Frossia sent a curtain for the window—grey linen with big green leaves on it,' and Anna Trofimovna imagined the room with its crimson and grey, and Dasha in it, and the stones of Moscow seemed to have less power to hurt. She knew that Dasha was working at the Academy and that she had friends. She heard about Kraspole: Lev Kirillich still made toys, and his workshop was now painted blue because the orange walls had begun tiring his eyes. Miss Thompson was beginning to look much older, and Frossia and Igor 'are so happy together that it makes me feel almost frightened sometimes,' wrote Dasha. Yet the best phrases in her letters gave no such details. Sometimes Dasha ceased being an

important young woman and became a gentle helpless child again in need of her *mamochka*. Then she used simple loving words, and Anna Trofimovna's eyes went dim reading them.

She told Maria Karpovna about Dasha's work.

'Sculpture? Will it be those monuments in cemeteries? Well, I have never heard of a woman stonemason, but women will do anything nowadays. Why, I must tell Vania—'

'No, it is not monuments,' said Anna Trofimovna feebly.

At last she saw Nil Ilyich. It was a brief meeting in a warm but soulless room with bare rough benches and a very dirty floor. He looked neat, his clothes tidy and his beard trimmed, but the glossily important man she had known was not there. His voice had cotton-wool in it. In her grief Anna Trofimovna remembered nothing except that he had been good to her after his own fashion.

'*Nilushka*,' she had never called him before by that intimate name, 'don't look lost, *golubchik*. God is merciful,' but he turned his face away, and there followed an awkward pause, neither of them had any words to use, until he asked some questions in a timid shrunken voice she could not recognise. When it was time to go, he whispered:

'Tell Dasha . . . Tell Dasha to forgive me.'

'But she has forgiven you, *Nilushka*,' Anna Trofimovna knew that never before had she wanted him more, now that he was hers so wholly, pitiful and helpless, but she knew she must go, and she stumbled down the shallow stone steps, and because she wanted him so desperately, she would not go to see him again. He was sentenced to three years' hard labour, and Maria Karpovna said she would get a sledge and have her driven to Loubianka, but Anna Trofimovna would not go.

'Ania, three years, and he is not a young man. Has your heart fallen into a well?'

But Anna Trofimovna said:

'I must send a telegram, Masha. Dasha must hear . . . ' and Dasha's brief reply came soon enough: 'Come back, *mamochka*. There is enough room for two. You will love the kitchen in the

wall. I get a student's allowance, it is not much, but we can manage, and I could earn a little more by my toy-making. Come back, my golden one, *zolotoya moyu*. The sofa is wide enough for two. I understand all and I kiss you *krepko, krepko*, hard, hard . . .'

That letter Anna Trofimovna hid in her bag and said she was leaving for Leningrad the same evening.

'But look at the weather, Ania! And your heart is not good. It is a proper *miatel*. How will you get to the station in such a blizzard?'

'I shall manage it,' said Anna Trofimovna.

She knew she would. She had done with Moscow, and Dasha was waiting for her, but at the barrier the ticket inspector called her *babushka*, and she wanted to cry; she was really old then, she looked like someone's grandmother, wife of a disgraced, imprisoned state official, but she straightened her bent shoulders as she remembered the untidy scrawl hidden in her bag. She was old and useless, but someone wanted her, and she was coming back.

The carriage was hot, she took the shawl off her head, and unbuttoned her coat collar. Opposite, a thin yellow-faced man was reading the *Crocodile*; she saw a cartoon, a bear and a monkey, and a man waving an umbrella. Anna Trofimovna did not understand what it meant, but she smiled at the umbrella. In another corner a fat man in a black karakul cap was saying to a slim fair boy in an airman's uniform:

'Pleasing people has always got you on.'

'That is an absolutely wrong approach. We have a different civic consciousness nowadays.'

Loose fragments of talk filled the carriage. But Anna Trofimovna did not listen. She leant back just as the train moved screeching and jerking. She closed her eyes, and the train rumbled on in the winter dark. Tickets were inspected again. People ate, drank, talked, slept, ate again. Anna Trofimovna opened her bag and read the scribbled lines over and over. 'Come back, darling, the sofa is wide enough for two.' It was good to look at those words: she felt tired, and something kept bothering her body.

Suddenly the train stopped so violently that luggage, kettles,

bundles and baskets fell off the racks. A heavy bag tumbled into Anna Trofimovna's lap, and she felt a sharp pain in her right knee. The small fat man crossed himself. Some of the women turned ashen-grey. Anna Trofimovna opened her lips and could say nothing. A guard ran hurrying by:

'Please keep calm, citizens!'

'Is the train on fire?' whimpered a woman, and from somewhere broke the thin plaint of an awakened baby. The young airman elbowed his way through the corridor, and in a few minutes he was back, his pink face important and slightly frightened.

'It was a body—found on the permanent way,' he said in an unsteady voice.

'Whose body?'

Nobody knew. They sat and waited, all tense again. The train moved presently. Anna Trofimovna rubbed her right knee. The carriage was quiet when a guard's red-capped head looked through the door: 'Anyone called Kukin, citizens?'

The young man started: 'Why, yes, I am Andrei Kukin.'

'Please come, comrade.'

The door closed. They all looked at one another. Nobody spoke. In less than ten minutes the boy was back, his pink cheeks white. No questions were asked of him, but he spoke jerkily:

'What are you looking at me for? They have got the body in the guard's van. You would not be allowed to see it. They thought I was a relation. They had found her papers on her. She is Yulia Kukina. But I have no sisters. If I had, it would have been difficult to identify her. What a mess! But very young hands. I told them we had nobody called Yulia in the family . . .'

'Why must they do it?' sighed the man in the karakul cap. 'There is the wrong approach for you!'

Anna Trofimovna stirred uneasily. She could not understand anything. Why should young people want to kill themselves when everything was being done for them? Or, perhaps, she had someone belonging to her . . . someone in great trouble . . . Yulia Kukina with very young hands . . . Anna Trofimovna fell asleep

She woke suddenly because she felt she could not breathe.

'Open the window,' she begged in a hoarse whisper, and nobody heard her, and she gasped, seized her bag, and screamed 'Open the window.' She panted, struggled to her feet, and fell back again, and someone's bearded face, with a red-brimmed cap above it, was close to her. 'Don't worry, grandmother, you are safe,' and Anna Trofimovna knew she was out of the hot crowded carriage. She was in the free cold air, light of body, and light of heart. She was a small floating feather, and life was a sunlit street. 'Why, Dasha, Dashenka is back, my little Dasha is back, and the sofa is wide enough for two,' she said distinctly, happily, 'Dasha has sent me a *gostinetz*, such a fairing,' she added, staring at the strange faces without seeing them. People were crowding about her, but she was in the air, she was free of them, free of everything, her right knee was not hurting her any more. 'Yes, my darling, a real *gostinetz*,' she said faintly, tried to smile, but her lips would not obey her, and her head sagged.

The train rumbled on through the dark. Nobody spoke in the carriage where the guard was carefully sealing Anna Trofimovna's wicker basket. In the van, close to Yulia Kukina with very young hands, lay Anna Trofimovna on her way home from a very tiring and perilous battle with the stones and noises of Moscow.

5

The pale-walled room was so still it seemed difficult to believe that there were more than eight hundred tenanted rooms in the block. Dasha, her pen idle, looked up and listened to the stillness. 'All quiet and bare,' she thought, her eyes caressing the crimson cover on the sofa and the grey-green curtain over the oblong of the window, 'but she knew of it—she would have been glad of it . . .'

She was writing to Frossia.

'I will come to you, but much later—in the spring. I am working so hard. I have so much to learn, and it is better to be busy. Thank

you for all you say. At first the news hit me with a hammer. I went back to the Maly Prospect days when I needed her so desperately because I was helpless and I suppose I could sense her own helplessness. I know it hurt her when she could not give me enough to eat. I went to the station to meet her. Praskovia and her husband had arranged everything, and nobody fussed me with formalities. There was that very long journey to Volkovo Cemetery. Rastannaya Street seemed longer than the old Nevsky in the days when trams did not run. They raised the coffin lid in the chapel. She was so changed that I could not take my eyes off her: there was that in her face which knew of the crimson sofa in my room. I shall miss her desperately . . . I crawled back along Rastannaya, reproaching myself. I should have loved her so much more, and even at the end I gave her little more than pity . . .'

She read it over and frowned. The last lines were true, and they humiliated her. She had been short-sighted, niggardly and stubborn, she said to herself, and No. 47 might have worn a different face had she had the gentleness and patience to discern it in the dark. Almost roughly she seized the pen again and wrote to Gleb:

'Thank you for your letter. Could you go to Tambov and see Trofim, bow to him for me and thank him? Say nothing: he will understand. I have had her buried by a priest and have had a *panichida* sung for her at the little Kiev Chapel. She would have liked it. Why do you ask about my work? If you must know, they say my sense of form and line is good, however undeveloped, and my feeling for colour too dim to worry about. I have known it for a long time. The colour I use on canvas is never the same I see in my mind, and all efforts at interpretation are about as happy as the face of an exiled monkey. When will you come to Leningrad? Are Nikolai and Trofim still together? I hope there is more peace between them, Trofim is so full of peace himself, he is living in such a quiet world. There is a crowd of new people at the studio, but I am too shy and too busy just at the moment, and they remain a crowd. Leningrad is a great lover in the winter. The snow is lying all quietly, we have not had any blizzards, and yet there is such

passion in it. If you ever telephone the Academy, ask for the sculpture school, and ring between nine and ten. Otherwise you might not get me.'

There came no reply, nor any telephone message from Kraspole. Dasha went on working in the great studio. She liked some of the students and her two old masters. She grew to love her small bare room. She went to see Praskovia and Vassia, often she met Frossia. Winter slipped into spring, the Neva was free, sparrows and starlings added their own music to the orchestra of running waters. But all those months were so many misty lanes to Dasha. Gleb did not write.

There came a day in early May when the city behaved like a spoilt child—breaking the morning with sudden laughter and then darkening it with tears. Runlets trickled down the wide gutters. Pavements shone in the metallic beauty of wet granite. The sky was curtained off by the close mesh of rain and the light went dim early in the afternoon when Dasha came back to her room. She heard a short, abrupt knock, and Gleb came in.

She stood by the window, her faded green overall richly smeared with greyish-green clay. She smelt of clay. Her hands were dirty. The flaming hair burned savagely from under a green kerchief swathed round her head, but her face went as pale as the walls, though her mouth broke into irony:

'Four months . . . Well, and so you come as a stranger, and I will have to learn you all over again, and that is so tiresome.'

He laughed and flung his coat across the sofa.

'How could I waste time on writing? I have been thinking and growing. Kirill thinks I am utterly lost. I shall be until you find me. Wash your hands. We are going across the bridge. I hear you can get roast chicken at the Brown Bear.'

'Why?'

'Must I explain? Need I explain? What can I say? Dasha, why don't you hurry? It might start raining again.'

'Why need I hurry?' Dasha sat down on the crimson sofa. 'Why do you want me to waste my time on washing my hands?'

It was all silence in the small room, and yet his voice reached her, and it came to her not so much as sound but as light, and gladly she remembered that the day was not yet ended, that the sun might still shower its gold upon the grey and purple stones of the city. 'Is he still speaking? Am I listening? Am I imagining? Or am I being born again? Yes, it must be that. Why, this very morning I was given a heavy soulless lump of clay, and when I left, the lump had nearly gone, the clay had my thought in it, and it was more than clay, and his words are more than sound.'

'Wash your hands,' he spoke impatiently, 'I was up all night, thinking of today, and I am hungry. Don't smile at the wall. Don't smile at all. When you smile, I forget to notice your clothes. Your smile is a cloak wrapping you from head to foot.'

'Gleb—' she said, and repeated 'Gleb—' it was not a name any more, it was a garland, a torch, a star within her hand, and she must say for the third time 'Gleb'.

'You are tiresome. I am here because I have so much to say and you keep interrupting. And also smiling. And I have said nothing at all.'

'But you are saying things all the time, Gleb, especially when you are silent. Listen, when "Rye" was broken, I imagined I could never work again. All that had urged me on seemed a burst soap bubble—until I opened my arms to something, Gleb. I can't put it properly.'

'No, you can't. You always get tangled in your words. But I think I know—it is like a secret on a child's sleeping face . . . I have seen it on other faces also. And heard it sometimes. It does not change and is never the same. There are different names for it. But I am hungry, Dasha. Throw a crust at me, will you?'

She opened the small wall cupboard, found some gingerbread and a sticky lump of raspberry '*pastila*', and brought them to him. He seized both the food and her hands.

'Gingerbread tastes of clay,' he made a face, 'but more than that shall be forgiven you.'

She held out her hand, and he shared the remaining gingerbread. She looked at the crumpled piece in her palm.

'When I worked at the Golden Cockerel, Lev Kirillich always

found it difficult to get enough Chinese white, and we used it very sparingly—a small dash here or a daub there just to set off the rich crimsons and blues. Now I think I know why all the colours gathered together vanish in white.'

'You will never know much about colour. Don't interrupt. I shall be hungry again in ten minutes. I have so much to say, and I can't make a fool of myself in the street.'

'I could never sculpt you,' she said suddenly, 'you change like the wind. I could never catch the wind into marble . . .'

'Wind? I am a clod, Dasha. I am a marionette, pulled this way and that. How can I explain? I shall be rude and abrupt and moody, but you shall stay in every mood of mine—a streak of gold across something dark and vile.'

'Stop it. And don't talk about your moods. Must I read a book I know by heart?' she said and washed her hands, and hurried him into the street.

The rain had gone. The afternoon wore a clean new dress of soft blues and greys. Dasha looked at the wide, faintly prosaic Fourth Line of Vassily Island. It was just a street, she thought, but underneath the roughly cobbled pavements and the stone foundations of dingy, badly painted houses, most of their front doors boarded up and their yard gates yawning darkly across the day's spun gold texture, underneath all the apparent imprisonment, precision, and ordinariness, there lived the same soil as breathed in free and wide country reaches, and Dasha drew a deep breath, glad and grateful to think of an all-satisfying identity beneath the outwardly hampering circumstance of polished stone and hewn timber.

'The world looks new,' said Gleb.

She made no answer. They crossed the bridge, hand in hand.

6

The lamp was lit in the room, but Igor and Frossia still lingered under the apple-trees. Somewhere down Dubovaya a young voice broke into an eager but untuneful song, then it died, and the world

was stillness, dew and violets together. It was so still that even the apple-boughs looked almost carven of some soft rose-white stuff. The earth, having listened to the day's varied music, now chose silence for her delight, and the brief sudden noise made by a frog was an intrusion to last but an instant.

'There is light from the window,' said Frossia, 'an oddly shaped island of light, and it falls upon the little bed I made just in front, and the broken up earth looks as fantastic as though seed pearls and gold dust were spilt on it.'

They went indoors. Frossia's work waited for her, but she picked up a book at random, feeling that the gorgeous night was enough of an excuse for a brief escape from purely academic duties. She opened De Vigny's *Journal* and read: '*L'année est écoulée. Je rends grâces au ciel qui a fait qu'elle se soit passée comme les autres, sans que rien eût altéré l'indépendance de mon caractère et le sauvage bonheur de ma vie. Je n'ai fait de mal à personne. Je n'ai pas écrit une ligne contre ma conscience ni contre aucun être vivant; cette année a été inoffensive comme les autres années de ma vie*', and she translated it to Igor.

'Fierce happiness,' he murmured, 'it could not be said of you and me: ours has been so quiet.'

'But it has had its fierceness even in the quiet,' she cried. 'We have not foregone fierceness of those remote early years. Why, look at this tiny place. It is not the young only who are fierce in work and in pleasure. Miss Thompson may be getting older and more tired, but you can still catch some fire from her. And Lev Kirillich, and so many others, all who had lived so close to a great bonfire that something in them will never be cold ashes. Only last night, coming back from Leningrad, I met that young Gleb at the station. Well, he had that *sauvage bonheur* in his face. They say he writes poetry. I wish I knew him better. He is so alive and so wide in his friendships. Dasha says he gathers intellectuals and rough factory workers together.'

'Have you much work tonight?' Igor asked suddenly.

'Not so very much,' she gave the pile of papers a brief glance which at once destroyed their urgency.

'Do you remember,' Igor turned his face away from the lamp towards the window as if he were determined to stay among the trees and the violets he could never see, 'do you remember how you and I began a journey? They gave me a week's leave, and you, too, were free, and we went to Moscow, and you had two more letters from South America, and you would not even answer. I never dared ask if you regretted—'

'I did regret—for a time,' Frossia knew that her candour never hurt him, 'I thought I hid it all rather clumsily. I did regret later when the worst of the famine was over and the sharpest pangs of upheaval were ended, and things one had almost forgotten about crept back into life, when one could buy stockings again, and turn on the electric light, and have a bath, and sleep between sheets . . . Things came back gradually. Yet I took to wanting everything back most greedily. I was moody and difficult for more than a year. You bore with me so patiently. You never asked questions.'

'Then they offered you a year in Paris, and you refused.'

'I was right. You knew it. Going to Paris would have sharpened that futile discontent. I remember what Dasha said once about poor old Barina. She had been living rather wretchedly till the Golden Cockerel made it possible for her to exist in moderate comfort. Well, she had been bred in relative luxury, and later knew real penury, but that modestly coloured prosperity brought in a host of minor irritants. Dasha laughed at it. I could not. I understood it so well,' she rose to trim the lamp, and said in a shy, small voice, 'but, my darling, why do you wonder?'

'I have not said so.'

'You do—'

'Because, when you read from that French book, I knew I have never been worthy of you. Years ago you would look at things as though they were near you and yet far, and you got confused, and could not see clearly. But later you learned something—I don't know what—I have thought sometimes that you, standing in a tumble-down ruin of a house, began using those charred and broken bricks, one by one, so quietly that nobody noticed you doing it, and

put here a bit of the wall, and there another, and the house stood up, and you went away, and let others see it, but you were not there to tell them you had done it.'

'Igor,' she cried, 'you have been reading or thinking too much. And now it is late. Olga Petrovna is coming tomorrow, she may be on her way to Kamchatka or Vladivostok, it does not matter.'

Frossia went out early next morning. On her way to the station she smiled at trees in young leaf, at the shining pavements, the very ordinary houses, at the people hurrying past her.

'Why am I so happy today?' she wondered, waving her hand at an errand boy flashing by on his bicycle. 'Yet need I marvel? All I have had, all I still have. Igor, Dasha, all my friends, Leningrad and Russia, so wounded, so scarred and lovable and sometimes impossible—it is my French blood that knows how impossible she may be at times—but all within her is caught up into a wonder of growing. Nothing has stood still all these many years, even small and stunted pear-trees seem to have born some fruit.'

She came to the station just as the little green-orange train puffed in. Out of it came Olga Petrovna, bright and dusty, her bundles all over the platform, and then suddenly Dasha stood there in a blue coat Frossia had not seen before, with a face Frossia could hardly recognise.

'Frossia, I had no time to telephone. I never slept last night. Boris Andreevich said I might miss today's lectures, but I must be back in the evening. Oh Frossia, I had to see you. Do you hear that? I could not write. It is like Easter morning, and I should have brought coloured eggs instead of a cake. What am I saying? You must not smile. It is all most serious, the most serious thing in my whole life, I mean—Gleb. No, I don't mean Gleb at all, I mean he and—' she stopped, her breath spent.

Behind her, Olga Petrovna was crying into a large pink handkerchief. The porters were grinning. The clerk smiled, pulling at his sandy beard. Some of the passengers clustered on the platform, listened, and smiled, wiping their eyes, and they smiled again because it seemed good to know that spring had come and a young

girl had fallen in love. The train moved off. A fawn-breasted pigeon, with steel-blue flashes on his back and violet streaks on his chest, sat on the lamp-post. The sun went in, and the tall trees looked dark and regal, but Dasha's voice danced on as if she were not standing on a platform, with Olga Petrovna's luggage still at her feet, and a porter waiting, and Frossia felt that a dawn had suddenly broken in the very heart of a night.

'But it is true. I must write to Vera Efremovna, to everybody else in the Crimea. To the whole world. Frossia, today is more than Easter. I have brought a walnut cream cake, the biggest I could find, and some *fintiflushki*, too, the little sugared ones,' she flaunted a large box tied with pink string. 'Let us have a party, let everybody come, please.'

'Yes, yes,' said Frossia, and seized Olga Petrovna's paper-wrapped bundles, and wanted to hug the porters and the clerk, and somehow they all came home, and the breathless story must be told to Igor, and told quickly before the sun went in again, and any clouds gathered across an uncertain sky. Dasha knew she must tell it quickly lest the fugitive fragrance of the most gorgeous words in all human language were to escape her, run away into misty spaces where even winged feet might not follow it, and the story told, the extravagant cake and the small, twisted, sugared *fintiflushki* were unpacked and admired. Dasha declared that she had no mind for food, the cake and the *fintiflushki* had been bought as a gesture, but Frossia laughed and boned some herrings. Olga Petrovna peeled potatoes and onions, and they had a good, old-fashioned *forshmak* for dinner, followed by tea and cake, and everybody remained as idle as though the world's whole business must needs be stopped for the day.

It was Dasha's own day, and they let her talk, Igor, Frossia, and Olga Petrovna, all three of them drawn back to their own morning hour, their spring, their high and secret moments. Dasha talked, on and on, and the more she said, the more inexhaustible grew her theme, borrowing fresh colour and more room from every detail she mentioned. Her imagination had lived long enough in Gleb's

past, now she must grow eloquent about his present and his future also, telling them that he might be appointed member of his faculty in Leningrad, telling them about many half-shaped plans of theirs, her eyes starry, and her hands gesturing freely as if she meant to hold the entire world within the joy living in her.

'It has been a great festival,' said Olga Petrovna at last, dipped a small lump of sugar into her tea, and sucked it pensively. 'He came to see me once,' she turned to Igor, 'he listened, he looked so clean and wise somehow. And, Dashenka, do you remember what he said about children?'

Dasha flung a hurried glance at the clock.

'But I must go,' she kissed them all and fled so suddenly they knew the day was done: that glad and breathless morning had run itself out, and now they could remember it and smile at its gorgeousness but from a distance. They could no longer say 'it is among us . . .' and their own gestures became slow, their voices dropped to a lower key. Igor looked tired, and Olga Petrovna leant back in her chair and praised the peace of Kraspole.

'My room in Vassily Island can be a bedlam sometimes. The house was built too hurriedly, I think, and they forgot to put enough stuff into the walls. Sometimes you can hear a whisper behind the wall. Don't you mind my grumbling now.'

'You have a week's leave?'

'Yes, I am going to Omsk on the twentieth—'

'Do you ever rest?'

'And what am I doing now? Heaving coal? Don't worry, *golubushka*.'

'Olga, will you ever get out of your cage?'

Olga Petrovna smoothed the creased folds of her worn green muslin dress. She patted her hair. She tried to smile and failed. Then she said slowly as if all she had to say were a long piece of string, and every word had to be cut off separately, a tiny piece of hemp.

'Get out of where? You do say odd things, Frossia. Even a turnip does not look the same when you have looked at it twice.

My work is so good. I had a geography class once somewhere near Kiev, I think, all women under thirty from the fruit farms. I talked to them about Africa, and one of them said later "God is like that." It startled me. "What do you mean—why should God be like Africa?" She said: "No, not like Africa, but what I mean is that we have never seen Africa, we are not likely ever to go there, but you have told us things just from a map, and we believe you. Well, it is the same about God." She stumped me, *milochka*. What would the grand people in Moscow say if they knew of me being a missionary?

'She has slipped away again,' thought Frossia, 'I have known her for years, I love and admire her so much, but she always slips away—'

Late that night, working at her desk, she heard strange muffled sounds coming from Olga Petrovna's little room. On tiptoes Frossia drew near the door and held her breath. Olga Petrovna was crying very softly and repeating the same words over and over again, '*Rodiny ty moy*' which, spoken in tears, at night, by a woman alone, meant something too holy even for a friend to interrupt with her comfort.

7

Far away, in the small room in the Fourth Line, Dasha lay awake, her eyes trying to study the dark blue sky. The window was open. The noises of the floor, wireless, telephone, gramophone, someone's feet dancing on bare boards, someone laughing, and a man quarrelling with his wife over a misspent rouble, all those had died, and the whole block slept. Dasha was alone, apart from them, yet she knew herself belonging to them all, except in such hours when a lamp would be lit somewhere in her mind, and she could interpret the crest of a wave in marble or in clay, and catch the anger in one man's clenched hand, and joy in another's upturned face. Otherwise, she belonged to them all.

'In the Crimea, all of them, doctors and teachers, specially Vera

Efreimovna, kept telling me that I must be careful all through my life because I never could be really strong. They had taught me so much and told me so little about myself. And Gleb said "it is the children who matter so terribly, the children born now and later who will have a childhood and not a nightmare." Gleb said to Olga Petrovna "a marriage without children is a soap bubble." Gleb read Ehrenburg's poem. It was splendid to listen to him and also terrible. The other night, when we were crossing the bridge, we saw a tattered little girl crying because she had lost her way, and Gleb held her close till the militiaman came, and with his other scarred hand clenched my fingers till it hurt, and he said nothing at all, and there was no need to say anything,' she thought, peopling the darkness of her little room with one pitiful phantom after another. At last she slept uneasily, tossing under the thin crimson counterpane.

A few days later, in the afternoon, Dasha was standing by the dark red massif of the old lighthouse in Vassily Island. Above her head the lichened green-grey stone head of a gigantic Neptune observed the rippling waters as he had done for more than two hundred years. To the left of her, the splash of the University Gardens added a darker note to the day's bright canvas, and the wide river flowed, a truly crowned queen because it was May, and there were laughter and singing and budding flowers in life.

She stood rigidly, her mind seeking to find some temporary foothold in surface impressions. There was much kindness and efficiency in the great and busy building she had just left. She remembered the small pink-painted table where she filled in a form, and the girl, who handed her a pen, had a queer blue net over her fair hair. She remembered a brief spell of waiting in a clean impersonal room, and then a stout, quiet woman, looking all the larger for her white coat, explaining almost too gently that she, Dasha, had really nothing to worry about, but there was just something about her bones . . . Bones . . . Bones . . . 'Such lovely exquisite things,' a medical student had once said in the Crimea. Could they be at all lovely or exquisite when . . . Dasha raised

her hand to her mouth. You could laugh and sing in the street, you could cry or even sob all to yourself, but you could not utter a scream which left you all naked and spilt all your agony over the pavement.

It was a rich dark blue day, but she must have imagined its beauty, she thought. All the buildings looked incised, glaring, indifferent to a heart's secret business. To be forced to observe them was a duty she dumbly accepted. In that hour the whole of life had to be taken in terms of timber and stone, static, severe, definite of shape, hard of tissue. She dared claim no kinship with any other kind of life.

She went along the quay, unaware of her bearings until she swung away from the river, went down a street, and found herself facing a small orderly garden, all pansies, violas, and suchlike tiny-stemmed, gaily coloured adventurers. She stared at them, refusing to admit their enamelled beauty. She saw them as so many grey dots scattered against a drab background. Today, tomorrow, and always, she would work and create in stone and clay and wood, meet people, know herself glad of friends and books and summer dew and winter snow, or a trinket against her throat. Today, tomorrow, and always she would remain aloof from the earth she loved because the earth gave life with boundless generosity, and she could not. She looked at her shabby, cotton dress. Under the blue-speckled stuff was her body, now an unwanted cumbersome thing, a hated stranger within the gates of her spirit. Once that body could not move at all, and scientists had worked on it for years, and now that body could walk without crutches; it ate and slept, knew fatigue and delighted in rest, it loved cold water and the feel of newly crushed grass against its skin, and its lips knew how to break into a new life under another's lips. That body knew so much, but it would never know enough.

She was not yet thinking of Gieb. She could not afford the luxury of stretching her hands towards more pain. She stayed with and within her own self only, all the numerous facets of that self which stole garish trinkets and told lies, and recoiled from hard

things, and said wounding things, and mocked frailty, and condemned other people's hardness, that self which knew impatience, humility, silent gratitude, greed, wonder and, at last, love—all those separate facets were now gathered together and put into a black-hung room where her sense of lostness lay on bare floor boards and where the window gave nothing but a glimpse of the sky blood-stippled by the wrath of God.

At last Dasha steeled herself to think of Gleb.

'Send him away, my love, my golden one. The "I" he knows and loves must go out of me, vanish altogether, and another "I" get in, strong and beastly and cold, and push him far away, my love, my darling. He must not go away with any regret. Regret might bring him back. He must go—with loathing!'

She moved, came to a chemist's shop, and remembered that she had some money in her pocket. She spilt the coins on the wide counter, trying to remember hints once given by Tania. She bought a box of lilac powder, a cherry-coloured lipstick, some mascara, and a small bottle of pungent scent. She passed a café, went in, and ordered a large walnut ice.

'I have enough to pay for another. Ices are good. I have missed the Greek art lecture, but Boris Andreevich won't mind. It is so hot today. It may be cool at Kraspole, and the pines will sing in the evening, and Lev Kirillich drink his tea out of doors, and Miss Thompson sit there in her very old flowered dress. I must go home now. I shall not telephone to Frossia. I must wait till seven. And at seven I shall not be alone—just for a little while . . . Leonardo da Vinci said that artists must stay alone because strength comes from solitude . . . I owe fifteen roubles at the canteen. The girl said yesterday: "Utina, you owe fifteen roubles—all for sandwiches!" I must not be so lazy about cooking. How good it is to have an ice when one is burning—'

Her room, for all its bareness, usually had a word or a phrase of a song for her. It said 'You are back. Give me some of your thoughts so that my walls might give them sanctuary. You are tired. Stay quiet.' Now the room said nothing at all to the wide-eyed stranger

who stood fumbling with the doorknob, who unwrapped several packages, and painted her face so hurriedly and crudely that she must wash it off just as hurriedly, staining the small towel with crimson and black blobs. The room stood still as though watching her repeat the effort—slowly, exquisitely, horribly. The elaborate *maquillage* was but a detail.

The door opened so violently that Dasha leapt to her feet and moved to the window. So Gleb saw her framed against the grey curtain, her blue coat unbuttoned, her hands and throat tense.

'You look lovely . . . But you are not "you." Are they doing a show at the Academy?'

She could not choose her words, she had neither time nor will, she was running down a narrow icy slope, her feet were slipping, her very lips seemed coated with tiny splinters of ice. Her cold hands clung to the curtain, they pulled at it so fiercely that there broke a thin tearing rasp, and the folds of green-grey linen tumbled all about her feet.

'Dasha!'

'Yes, I am going out. I should have written or sent you a telegram. Will you go away? It is all stupid, you are a lamp-post, I think of you as a lamp-post, and nobody can love a lamp-post. And I am a doll. One of the dolls at the Golden Cockerel . . . There is nothing else except that we have both been stupid, stumbling about in a fog,' she hurried on, and she had neither reason nor argument, and she must hurry and pile on absurdities, and keep her face hard and her voice bitter. 'Well, it may be my work. It is my life. You would not understand it. *Your* work bores me. I have not been properly educated . . . It may all have been romantic, but you interfere with me, your moods trouble me. It is all such fog . . . There is nothing else. Go, go,' clenching her small fists, she shouted, 'you could not marry a doll, a thief—yes, I used to steal quite a lot, and I am a liar—and I want to be left alone, do you understand—?'

Gleb sat down.

'Kirill always said he first liked you because you were a hopeless

liar. You can't even strike an attitude. You can't act. You are about as convincing as one of your little wooden animals in the days when you could not bring them to life. Suppose you and I looked at it from the beginning,' his voice was cool, almost impersonal, there seemed little change in him except that a light had gone from his eyes and the scar had turned deep purple.

'The beginning? There is none. There is only the end . . .'

'Dasha, I would not mind if you used filthy language or got drunk, but I do mind you being stupid. You can't do it cleverly.'

'Life can't always be clever,' she stamped her foot, and the thin cloak of pretence slipped away, and her eyes shone with anger. 'It is your own fault. You sent me to that hell. You said that a marriage without children was a . . . oh, I can't remember, and what do comparisons matter? I could never marry. How could I? Now you understand,' and, having spoken, she sobbed and moved away from the window, trailing the tumbled folds of green-grey linen behind her, and flung herself on the sofa, and rubbed her face until rouge, lipstick and mascara cascaded down in thin uneven streaks, staining her bare throat and the blue cotton dress, and Gleb never moved from the chair. He sat still, staring at the uncurtained window.

'I see it all,' he said slowly, 'you, lovely, foolish heart . . . I can hear you saying "I shall be cold and hard and brazen, and send him away, bewilderment and disgust in him . . ." But you can't wear tinsel . . . You can be bad tempered and sullen and even unjust, but you can never pretend. And I think I am very angry that you did not share it with me. Did you then imagine that I came to you for what I could get out of you—either joy for myself or a child for us both? Or that I came to you because I am an artist and you are another, and we can speak a language both understand? Or because there is warmth in your face and shyness in your manner when you are happy as it should be, since all happiness comes from the highest source, and we should walk softly in it. Oh, you lovely, foolish, simple heart—there is nothing more I can say.'

Somewhere in a distance a full-throated voice began singing

about a valise full of muslin and brocade for a heart's desire, but the words struck against the bare walls as though they could not meddle with the room's quiet. He said she had beggared him of all words, and she felt that she had been laid in a grave and was now raised to the sweet free air again, and her own voice must needs be stilled.

But when he had gone, Dasha looked at the chair where he had sat, at the pink and white saucer half-filled with the cigarettes he had smoked, and then the sight of her swollen and stained face urged her to immediate and simple tasks. She scrubbed her cheeks and chin, and washed the towel, gathered up the torn curtain, and sat down to mend it.

She thought of the academy canteen, the thickly buttered sandwiches and the mountains of pale noodles in huge brown bowls, of her bench in the sculpture school, of Lev Kirillich's scarred hands nursing a stumpy pipe, of the way Praskovia rubbed the pencil into her cheek until the skin went slatily grey. Dasha thought of Frossia's delight in new books, of Nikolai's brooding eyes staring at her, of Trofim's gentleness, Kirill's drollery, and Miss Thompson's fussiness over her brushes. Dasha thought of her whole world, seeing it now in shade, now flooded with some such light as she had seen and loved on the Crimean hills in early spring. She thought of all the stress, hardship, squalor, ugliness and beauty which went to the making of ordinary life in Leningrad and elsewhere. She thought of the glory falling between her hands during those rarely minted hours when a concept, born of her mind, moved towards its expression and she felt both exalted and humbled. She thought of a thousand things as her needle crept over the green-grey linen, the ice on the Neva, a block of rose-veined marble, the leaves falling in Summer Gardens, the fawn-breasted pigeons quarrelling in Kazan Square.

But of Gleb she could not think at all because her heart was full.

chapter six

THE WIDENED HABITATION

I

SOMETHING had gone wrong with the electricity in the train. The dim carriage was empty, and Gleb sat in a corner, his fingers over his eyes. He could only cry when he was happy, and he had cried very seldom in his life, but now he knew that something new and miraculous would always remain between Dasha and himself. He also knew now that the city and the people in it, the whole country, her inwardness and her occasionally untidy outward raiment, her effort and failure, her silence and her music, each and all could be loved in a special and intimate way. He felt that much good could be done by her big untiring hands, and that even he had some new strength given him to do a small portion of good before his evening fell, and he cried because of his strength and joy, and wished he might stop the train, leap out on to the high sandy embankment, wander far away, and tell a lonely poplar, or some stray cattle, or even the common grass under his feet that he, Gleb Krylov, was standing on the top of a mountain, and he, who could use words so richly and fortunately, found himself repeating one word only until it wove itself into every strand of his thoughts and shone there like a star and, like a star also, breathed an eternal quality.

Hurrying to the hostel, Gleb passed a shop and bought the first thing his eyes saw. He could ill afford the money, and the thing was expensive and ugly: a fat, loudly pink satin cushion with a gold lyre clumsily embroidered in the left-hand corner.

'Well,' said Kirill, 'I like it. My pillow is nothing but straw. Where have you been? Your eyes are red, and you look hungry. There is a very nasty ancient cabbage pie on the book shelf—unless you prefer macaroni in the canteen.'

'Kirill—'

'Yes, I know. Or rather I don't know, and I am not going to pester you. Put the cushion down and eat. The pie is still edible. Have another piece. I might fetch some beer if you asked nicely. Gleb, stop staring at that ghastly pink horror. Nikolai and Trofim may be here any moment . . .'

Gleb chewed the stale musty pie. He had not heard much. Kirill, sprawling on his bed among books and dog-eared sheaves of manuscript, watched him and thought: 'It had to come. It *has* come. He would not have cried otherwise. He will ask to be sent to Leningrad. They will send him, his work is so good, and he must get to the centre of things. Anyway, this place will soon be pulled down—it is not likely to weather another winter. I could also ask for a transfer myself, go to Toms, and go on with my dull little job. I knew it would come. I wanted it to happen. It may be the end of his old nightmare, or the beginning of a new one, but it was inevitable. Inevitable things are as pleasant sometimes as a hand thrust into a burning candle . . .' Kirill buttoned the collar of his frayed blue shirt and looked up and grinned at the opening door.

'Trofim,' he held up the satin cushion, 'wouldn't you like it at "Tambov"?''

Trofim sat on the edge of the bed and smiled distantly, but Nikolai retorted:

'That at "Tambov"? A lumpy mattress is getting too soft for us nowadays!'

They laughed, and Trofim stroked the satin with his huge fingers. He had but little talk in him these days, thought Kirill, and was wrong: the night before the brothers had spent themselves in argument about freedom, Trofim's ideas of it had shocked Nikolai, silenced him for a while, and then plunged him into a river of loud and foul abuse. Freedom to Trofim meant owning nothing, refusing all things, but he could not explain that his consciousness of such liberty came to him both from within and without. Now Nikolai sat there, and looked at him with eyes where scorn was blended with love, and the discomfort of the pause was broken by two earnest,

grimy, bespectacled young men rushing in and shouting at Gleb:

'Comrade Krylov, we have been looking for you all day. It is incredible! Lermontov's centenary falls in less than two years, and nobody is agreed on the final version of the Demon—'

'They could always use two or three variants. There is no paper shortage, surely?'

He spoke coldly. He wanted Trofim. He had no desire for academic subtleties. He turned away from the bespectacled enthusiasts and sat by Trofim.

'Take this cushion along to "Tambov", if you like,' he smiled, 'you may look as if you had nothing to wish for, and you are wrong, Trofim—there are a million things you want, why, your shirt needs a new patch on the elbow,' and suddenly he turned again, smiled at the whole room, and shouted, 'Comrades, be civil to Kirill, and he might fetch us some beer,' and he never knew why he said it. It had so often happened that he wished to be alone, rid even of Kirill, and yet he kept people about him as though they were necessary to his peace. Tonight he wanted to spend hours outside, under some old lime, away from all human voice and intrusion, and yet he urged them all to stay, he offered cigarettes, he clapped Nikolai on the back, and coaxed Kirill to go after the beer. 'Comrade Krylov, I maintain that no variant—'

'To hell with Lermontov, gentlemen! We must have beer and drink to this ruined roof, and may it fall on our heads some night when we are miserable—'

A thin curly-headed youth in a dirty raincoat appeared in the doorway.

'Gleb Petrovich, ah, Gleb Petrovich,' he wailed, his voice a rusty accordion, 'your article on Goncharov, please—for the wall newspaper. Comrade Grachev says it should have been sent in yesterday!'

'Grachev is an owl! I have not begun it. I may do it next week or, perhaps, when I am dead. Go to Imaev, Kostia, he has such nice statistics to give you, a whole column of some archæological findings, far more useful than any nonsense about Goncharov.'

'Comrade Imaev is in Moscow, Gleb Petrovich, how could I go to him?'

'No, you could not. Tell Grachev he shall have it at six o'clock tomorrow, Kostia, don't forget—six in the morning. If I find him asleep, I might wake him with a bottle of ink splashed over his face. Now run, Kostia, we are having an important meeting.'

Kirill fetched beer in an enormous jug. The cabbage pie was sliced with a blunt knife, and some *kilki* appeared in someone's soap dish. Pie, bread, cake and pickled fish were all eaten together. Gleb sat on the table, a silver-scaled *kilka* in one hand, and talked jerkily.

'You must have no room for pity. Tolstoi was right somewhere. The old-time *moujik* lived sternly. He loved nature in a blind and grumbling way, and went on fighting her all his life, and something was happening to him all the time. He took so much for granted. We can't. We must wriggle and squirm and get puzzled by daylight, and we imagine that a blind wall might become a horizon if we looked at it long enough, and yet we go on fighting it all. There is the splendour of effort for you! Look here, I am no mathematician, but I had always longed to learn astronomy. I look at the stars and admit my own lack of importance, and everything seems trivial, a soap bubble, a theme for an instant, and therefore possible and accessible.'

'And it should be so,' said Trofim, surprising them all, 'because there is eternity.'

Kirill laughed and refilled Trofim's mug. Nikolai spat savagely. The Lermontov experts shrugged and helped themselves to more *kilki*, but Gleb leapt down from the table.

'He said "eternity", and all of you look as though he had said something in Arabic. Comrades, how we fumble over words! Trofim, listen, to me it is a word laden with a meaning that annoys me because I can't grasp it. You spoke it differently. I know you are a believer, but could mere faith have put that shining into the word as you spoke it?' and his thought wandered away from the room so that he could say within himself: 'Perhaps, if now, before them all,

I said "Love", the word would shine like a star, and I would know the reason for its shining. Is it the same with Trofim? But I dare not ask,' and aloud he said, 'Yes, there was a shining, Trofim, and faith alone could not have done it, but we are all groping so clumsily, you must be laughing at us.'

Trofim's huge shaggy head was bent low as though he were struggling to decipher a secret he could see written on the bare and dusty floor boards. Gleb urged him again, and he raised his face, and there was embarrassment in his eyes as he looked at the sooty wall. Then he said slowly, carefully, a small child tracing his letters on a slate:

'Well . . . Faith alone is not enough, you said. I can't follow you. First, understanding must come: a dark power will trouble your mind, and you must cleanse yourself, and the light of understanding will burn in you, and truth stand so revealed that you may never escape it. Once you know it, you shall love it and, loving it, your will shall stay whole and unwavering, until you come to the heart of the shining.'

'Those are not your own words, Trofim.'

'And how could they be? I am a dim man,' said Trofim humbly, 'no, St. Macarius of Egypt wrote them,' and suddenly none of them had any more to say.

The food was eaten, the beer drunk, cigarette stubs were piled in the white saucer. A few inconsequential remarks were muttered here and there, and they went, and Gleb seized a rough grey blanket. The night was dark, and he stumbled once or twice, picking his way to the nearest lime-tree. He spread the blanket, fell on it, and lay, eyes wide open, learning to read the scroll of the dark about him.

Trofim had troubled him, Trofim seemed to understand the incomprehensible, his words were few and rough, his thought moved slowly, but neither that slowness nor verbal beggarity hampered him, thought Gleb, and dug himself deeper under the blanket, but the ground was hard, and he knew he would not sleep for the blended tumult of unease and happiness that possessed him. He crept back to the quietened hostel, fetched paper, pencil, and a

stool, and sat in the dimly lit passage, roughing out his article on Goncharov. It was almost done, he felt weary and sleepy when he heard a hurriedly stifled cough just outside the door, and came out. There was neither light nor darkness in the world, only a soft greyness lending wonder and tenderness to trees and walls alike, and Gleb saw a shadow, darted forward, and clutched at a thin arm.

'Let me go,' hissed a boy's voice, and Gleb read arrogance and fear in it, and pulled him inside the passage. The light was dim, but he held his prisoner, frayed shirt and cotton trousers, bare feet, fair touzled head, angry brown eyes, and a thin pink mouth struggling against tears. A basket hung over his shoulder. Gleb saw a flat rye *karavai* and some smoked herrings. The fish smelt. He touched the loaf and found it stale.

'Were you hungry?'

'Yes,' the thin voice had shed its fear, and Gleb's mouth went into a straight stern line.

'Why should you be? You are a schoolboy.'

'I was. I hated school. Petka made it hell for me. Petka is bigger than I am. His fingers can pinch. I dared not complain. They would have laughed. I ran away.'

'Where is the school?'

The boy did not reply.

'Where do your parents live?'

'Nowhere. I am a foundling. Petka says there is bad blood in me, noble blood, he says. There may be. I hate bugs and lice. Petka—'

'Never mind Petka. He is not here. What is your name?'

'Alexander Krolikov. They call me Sashka.'

'You have stolen from our canteen kitchen.'

'Well, the door was open. The bread is stale, the fish stinks. The basket lay on the floor. Who could blame me?'

'There is the telephone at the end of the passage. You know that I ought to ring up the militia. You have stolen and you are a run-away. They will send you back.'

The boy shrugged his thin shoulders.

'Ah well . . . Life is a curse anyway. Petka is clever. He will

pull the trapeze from under me and kill me. He tried it once before. But I was too quick for him. Petka will manage it some day . . .'

'Where is the school, Sashka?' asked Gleb again, and the boy would not answer. 'What did you mean to do?'

'Work my way to the shore, find a boat, row across. I am good at fishing. But you can't get far with an empty belly. I would be all right away from Petka. With Petka about, I am dumb and afraid, and that is bad.'

Gleb said nothing. His hand still clutched the bony little arm. He hated Sashka and also loved him. He hated himself for the weakness which flung him back to the earlier dim years when he stole, when he went afraid, when he knew himself hurt by people and by life, when others, made in Petka's image and likeness, wanted to kill him, Gleb, because there were seven of them in the gang, and he was the smallest and weakest among them, and days came when there was enough food for six only. Gleb's cold fingers tightened round the thin arm, and he saw the dirty freckled face wince, the brown eyes well with tears, but Sashka said nothing.

'Go,' Gleb muttered hoarsely, 'why the hell did you have to come here? Go to the sea, go to the devil, go at once, and take your basket, and good luck to you.'

'So you are drunk,' said the boy, 'I have heard all the people in colleges get drunk every night,' he stood there, astonished, almost dazed, bewildered, clouding his brown eyes, and Gleb released him so violently that Sashka staggered back for an instant. Then he steadied himself, stooped for the basket, and ran down the path.

Gleb groped his way back to the hot and dirty room. Kirill slept, one hand flung across his face. Gleb lay down, shivering in spite of the heat.

2

'Vera Efremovna,' said Dasha to herself, 'would have said "moderation is better than a ripe apple . . . I can't cope with so much enthusiasm", but she does not know that life can be a big

camp fire on a dry still night. I must write to her, and to so many other people.' She glanced at the window-sill littered with envelopes. Even Praskovia had sent a brief note in her masculine thick handwriting: '*Golubushka*, little dove, keep the morning near you, it is wiser than all evenings put together, and I embrace you . . .' and there were letters from Kraspole and from half-forgotten acquaintances in the Crimea.

She had no time for them now: she had the food to arrange. Gleb had clamoured for a party with wine and goose at some expensive place, but she had refused. 'You will be tired after that very important lecture, and what do we want with noise and glaring lights and dancing?' She could offer him an omelette and Cracow sausage still in its silver paper, coffee-flavoured buns, and beer, but the little table must not be spread until Gleb had seen his presents: Kaverin's new novel, Pushkin's centenary edition, a blue tie, and a slim self-propelling pencil. Books were expensive, she had chosen short commons for more than a week, and refused to consider the purchase of shoes she needed badly, but Gleb must have his Pushkin on the eve of their wedding-day, the evening of his faculty lecture.

A brown cloth beret over her flaming hair, Dasha came into the university hall so early that empty benches stretched between her and a severely undraped platform. A few lamps were lit only to stress the bleak rigidity of the place. Bare white-washed walls, drab deal benches, something almost repelling about the distant platform, the hall had a whispering voice: 'You are very young and most foolishly in love. There is little room for such gay circumstance here,' and quietly, humbly, Dasha chose a bench by the door.

People began drifting in. She knew none of them. Nobody noticed her. Some were young, raw students, but here and there sat older men and women, obviously at their ease in the hall which belonged to them, and, as she looked at those, thin clammy fingers of anxiety closed upon Dasha's mind. They seemed so learned and certain, rich in experience and judgment, they would be chary of praise and open-handed with their criticism. Almost Dasha wished

she had not come alone. 'If only Frossia or even Trofim were here,' she thought, sitting by herself, neighboured by anxiety and a few clumsy girl students who stared at her hair and said nothing at all.

Gleb came out, so distant, separated from her understanding, pride and warmth by rows of benches now crowded with important and unimportant people. She craned her neck to see him, and her heart ached. He looked tidy enough in a rough grey suit, his white shirt open at the throat, and to her he looked rare and deserving of great honour, but she also saw him defenceless and lonely, and her eyes went dim. 'He is so young,' she thought wildly, 'but they would not pity him because he is young.' Gleb's bow was jerky, and his hands awkward over some papers. He drank a tumbler of water. A distant clock boomed the hour, the bell rang, and the huge white doors were closed.

Gleb began, and some sixth sense in Dasha interpreted the mood in the hall: they were listening politely, they stayed remote. The hall grew bitterly cold, and on the distant platform a fair-headed young man stood, trying to light a fire, matches slipping through his fingers.

'Nikolai Nekrassov was born in 1821. His people had a small estate near Yaroslav. The poet hated his home. His father, a petty squire, was a rude, half-illiterate tyrant and bully. Nekrassov ran away from home, lost caste, and for some years existed on the edge of penury. His first book of poems appeared in 1840, it showed thin promise, and was criticised without mercy. He then turned to hackwork, gradually found certain security, and in 1845 bought a moribund periodical, *Sovremennik*, and turned it into the best literary review in the country. Twenty-five years later it was suppressed for its left tendencies. Nekrassov was a good editor, hard publisher, gambler and debauchee. Not long before his death he married a peasant girl. He died in 1877, having never won recognition. Turgenev said that poetry did not as much as spend a night in his verse.'

Gleb stopped and coughed. The hall remained polite and distant. Dasha dared not look at any of them. She kept her eyes on the

platform. Gleb stepped off the desk steps, and his quiet voice deepened with passion.

'We respect Turgenev's judgments. Then why mention a man whose verse was never poetry? He had a host of faults, he suffered from lack of craftsmanship and artistic culture, he had not even an elementary knowledge of prosody. To the very end he rebelled against all recognised conventions in poetic form. Why mention him? His personal life had nothing beautiful or exciting. It ran in drably coloured and sordid grooves, always stained with self-interest, petty dishonesty, vulgarity, especially in his relations with women. Do what you will, you could not make much from that narrow and dry chronicle. And Nekrassov was no Pushkin to reach the heavens by his winged words of passion, no Dostoevsky to plumb the depths of man's suffering, no Lermontov to win homage by the sculptured quality of his lyrics and the beauty of his loneliness. So why should we mention him?' Gleb's voice went on, and the hall stirred as though a burning brand had been tossed among them. 'Why be glad of the work he left us? Because all ingratitude is born of baseness, and Russia would sink in ingratitude if she forgot her debt to Nekrassov. His best, most original, work is precisely the creation of a new, blessedly vigorous poetry unfettered by traditional standards, and he wove himself into the Russian texture, and was not afraid of dying in obscurity because he had said what he had to say in the only way he could say it. Our country's great tapestry could not be imagined without his poetry. He took his themes from the squalor, unhappiness, and inarticulacy of a people he understood better than most others in his day, and he is great because interpreting those same people, he borrowed no fantastic colours, had recourse to no sublime philosophy, and meddled with no abstract problems—he dealt in peasants' words, cattle, dirt and smells. He used no pretty words. He painted no elegant pictures. He gave no specious beauty to the suffering he saw as ugliness, and he took it for his own, and made it live. That is why he cannot be denied today, that is why we need not consider the gambler and the grumbler, that grey-coloured pebble on the grey

beach of his social level. There is no skilfully staged acceptance in his work, no objective understanding. He did not understand the peasant's stress—he lived it. He has no pity in him. Instead he offers you compassion because he suffered with his neighbour and laughed with him . . .

'You might say that his deepest urge was to create gods, and that in the people he came to see something of the divine embodiment. That may or may not be true. So far as I can read him, Nekrassov always makes the personal dissolve in the universal. Think of his "Pedlars", note its theme of tragic content, born of deeply recognised tragedy. Such poetry could be sung in a lusty major key. Again "Who is Happy in Russia". Remember the sombre beginning and the joyous end. He saw the worst in the people, and his words never softened it. He had no use for the lace-edged pink pictures of peasant life. He gives you the odours of stale sweat and manure heaps for scent in a cut-glass bottle. He has nothing to say to idle romanticism. He never tinkered with a pen-knife—he swung an axe. But he did see beyond bears' dens, illiteracy, drunken brawls, incest, bugs and lice . . .' Gleb offered a few quotations, flung down the book and added drily, 'His interpretation proved unacceptable in that day of half-shaped decision and half-hidden effort. The truth hurt too much . . .'

Suddenly the hall was quiet. 'Why don't you clap,' Dasha, unaccustomed to dry academic usage, wished she might shout, and she wanted to be with him, kiss his mouth, but she must wait for the crowd to thin out; then she climbed the rickety steps, stood on the platform, and said:

'We have some Cracow sausage at home . . . Come.'

'It was generous of you not to mind,' said Dasha. 'You see, my mother would have liked it. I can't explain, you must never expect me to explain, Gleb. Well, it seemed a golden seal on a rainbow morning, just our standing there, so still, and then walking round the *analoï*, and kissing the cross, and sharing the wine-cup, and something was happening all the time—'

'No, I did not mind. I felt shy and tongue-tied. But you seemed at home in that dim little place, and it was enough for me.'

'Because it is our wedding morning, and I feel as though a very special sky were above our heads, all crowded with jewelled gates and turrets, and they are all ours, because it is our wedding morning, and the whole day is ours, and also tomorrow, and five more days, and we mean to be idle and do what we please, and you must give me a present,' she said, as they came to the Exchange Bridge, and she looked at the gold-shot waters below, 'you must tell me about the happiest day you have ever had,' and she felt the thin, scarred hand stiffen in hers, and thought 'God, what have I done? Why, he may never have had one at all . . .'

Yet his voice rang warm with pleasure:

'It is just like you to ask for such a present. Well, when I was a boy, I once wandered far away, beyond Narva Gate, and came to a huge rye field. It was hot. I slept. Cramp woke me. I wanted to leap to my feet, and then I saw a fieldmouse on my bare thigh. I must have slept very quietly. Cramp hurt me, but I would not move until the fieldmouse did. I don't know why—but it made me happy. I could have sung for joy that day.'

'How old were you then?'

'About eleven, I think,' and Dasha thought: 'When he was eleven, he lived with that gang,' and for a few instants she dared not look at him.

'What of yours?' he asked.

'I don't know. The day I ate my first orange, perhaps, or the first winter day I did not feel frozen to my bones . . . No, I am wrong. The happiest day of all came when I knew I could work because God was nearest then. Gleb, you must never mind that about me . . .'

'You worry so much about expressions. Well, you are at home in a church, and I feel an alien. Yet we use different forms for the same thing,' he raised his head. 'Your jewelled turrets are veiled in grey. That is Leningrad for you—lovely in her suddenness,' and they went back to the Fourth Line.

'Anyway, we have two chairs.'

'And I have bought a second tumbler. So long as I keep it tidy, the table is big enough for us both. Gleb, Kirill said you were almost German in your neatness. You must not mind if I fling things about,' she wrinkled her freckled forehead. 'Stockings, towels, combs, and pencils just refuse to be put away. And don't imagine you could use the wall kitchen. It looks beautiful, but it has never worked. I use it just for anything.'

'Yes, even slippers and ink bottles!'

She stood by the window.

'I wish I could give you the river, Gleb. There is nothing but the Fourth Line, and sometimes it looks alive, and then it dies in common scenes and small noises and ordinary people. But I have grown to love it just the same. You know the way one gets to love perfectly common things—as if an iron spoon were plated with gold.'

'So it can be,' said Gleb.

She had not been at Kraspole since her wedding-day, and now it was autumn, and she had heard of Nil Ilyich's death of pneumonia in a prison-camp. He died intestate but, apparently, No. 47 and all its belongings were registered in Anna Trofimovna's name and they now belonged to Dasha as the direct descendant, and the news reminded her that she had neglected all her friends, so she went there.

She had never seen Kraspole so lovely. The great park sang with colour. The sun spilt its gold upon the least important, the most weather-beaten cluster of burnished leaves. Dasha knew that in a week or two the wind would surge from the sea, spend its cold grey fury on those boughs, and carpet the dark earth with the multi-coloured texture for a few days only until the first autumnal rains would ravage the glory and turn it into a sodden brown-grey shroud, yet, none the less, some of the grandeur, visibly destroyed, might live on in memory. The four seasons were really one, Dasha thought, a never ceasing cycle of conception, birth, maturity and decay, turning once again to the courage of conception. In the

country, she reflected, walking down Dubovaya, it was easy, almost inevitable to watch the lovely and solemn gradation, to see an eternal quality mirrored in the fugitive adventures of the seasons. In the country it was so natural that one forgot the greatness in the simplicity.

But in a city, however intimate and beloved, one had to strive towards a dimly remembered pattern, achieve a balance not so much from without as from within, and foster a sense of quiet strong enough to rise above the endless challenge of decaying timber and crumbling stone, a sense of quiet deep enough to delve below the apparent riddle of so many tired and defrauded faces of men and women who, having once held the ring, later chose to break off a bit of it, and now stared at the splintered symbol, their imagination too blunted to lead them anywhere.

That sense of quiet Dasha knew she had not yet achieved. She had looked at it from a distance, appraising its beauty but declaring it too fragile and precious for her own awkward and tumultuous hold. Gleb knew more. She continued learning of him, though on occasions he left her puzzled, seeking an open doorway and bruising her hands against locked and barred gates. 'Life is so varied with us,' he said once, 'that its very variety carries the seeds of monotony. The rhythm of everyday life must needs beat to a pulse appointed by social conditions. But rebellion is always necessary. So little space is left for things outside the rhythm, and they mean effort, and they hurt, but they save,' and watching him, Dasha knew that the very hardihood of the effort set him on fire.

She came to No. 47 and walked through the dusty quiet rooms. The sight of the back room, with its heavy mahogany and green satin curtains, left her strangely unmoved. She had been wounded in that house, left temporarily impoverished by the grey meanness of its spirit, known many hours of hot anger and frozen desolation, yet no locusts had really eaten those years, she was young and vigorous, in love with her life and work, and she loved Gleb, and he had destroyed all the shadows fallen upon her. The small house was a beggar and she a rich woman, and from her heights she stood,

appraising it all with loving pity and not with distant contempt, and, locking the green door, she hurried off to Frossia's.

'But why apologise?' said Igor. 'We knew we would not see you the whole summer. We have been hearing from Praskovia. You are well and busy and happy, and you have a second chair, and Praskovia is appalled by your tidiness. Now you have come.'

'Dears, dears,' Dasha faltered, 'I could not tell you much if I sat here till midnight. There is Gleb, and the Academy, I have begun working in marble, there are lectures and committees, and meals are tiresome, my kitchen stove won't work, and it is nearly always noodles at the canteen, or something cheap and tepid at the *Poor Dog* down in the Fourth Line. We have no money for exciting places. I mean to have that furniture auctioned—but the money will go on books and, perhaps, the Caucasus next summer. Well,' she sat there, breathless and starry, 'there is Gleb. I have no words there. I would bore you, and you must tell me about Kraspole.'

Miss Thompson looked very much aged, said Frossia, but she still painted toys. Lev Kirillich's barn was sky-blue. 'It almost hurts you to look at it,' laughed Frossia, 'but he is so happy, and some Americans went to buy his toys.'

'Were they nice to him?'

'Of course. Why ever not? And they were generous. I went to interpret for him. They wanted to hear his story.'

'They did not look as though they were sorry for him?'

'Sorry for him? Gracious, no. They had tea there, and seemed enchanted with those strange walls. They nearly missed their train back to Leningrad.'

'I am glad. It is one of those puzzling things. Some time ago a Frenchwoman came to the Academy. She wore lovely clothes—all beige and scarlet. She had very curious eyes, the kind with a harsh-lined kindness in them. She did not know a word of Russian, and a man from the Intourist came with her. She went from studio to studio, and I saw her at the door. She looked puzzled and sad—we might all have been in a dark cellar and she looking at us from a sunlit room. Frossia, it angered me . . .'

Igor sighed.

'Well, you must not blame them altogether. We have kept denying one another for so many years, and have used good strong glue for so many silly labels. Years ago I believed and I still believe that some day we will recognise men beyond each other's frontiers. Perhaps when many hearts get hurt in some great sorrow or other. A wounded heart is the same, be it covered by Russian or foreign flesh . . .'

When Dasha was going, he said slowly as if it hurt him to speak.

'Bow for me to Leningrad and the river . . .'

They were alone, and Frossia looked at him. He seemed tired and sunk, and very far away. She tiptoed into the kitchen.

He had earned his weariness. In a drawer of her desk she kept an extravagantly phrased letter from his colleagues praising him for twenty years' service. He had not done twenty years' work, he had toiled all his life, among the people, he belonged to the country, and the country was his.

'That is his secret,' she thought, 'he has always felt an oneness, and sometimes could communicate it even in most troubled days, and people drew near and would not go away empty-handed. But, of course, he is tired. None of us, in the middle forties and older, can escape weariness. We did not live in our own youth, we burned, and we did not die because we burned, but now we can't help being tired if we have to stand in a tramcar for ten minutes, or launder a blouse, or sweep a room,' she reached for a well-darned cloth and began washing up the teacups. 'Yes, we burned then, and it must have hurt, it hurt for a long time, but when you live with a hurt, you somehow come to love it.' She dried the thick cream pottery cups very carefully: she could never forget the days when a broken cup meant an irretrievable loss.

3

Trofim's wall in Tambov was empty: the cheaply framed ikon of the Vladimir Lady had gone. On the bare floor boards lay a

bulky bundle, wrapped in sacking and tied with a shabby strap. Trofim's sheepskin coat was on the bench, the rough leather *rukavitzi*, which seemed too huge even for his hands, were thrown over the coat. All those Nikolai saw on coming in, and he saw Trofim crouching by the old brick oven. It was hot in the room, he wore a frayed white shirt, tucked into his cotton breeches.

Nikolai waited. The hot sun pouted into the barn-like room, coloured the dust with gold, and the dull red brick oven burned roscate-crimson. Nikolai stared at the bundle, the things on the bed. 'Surely he won't need his sheepskins in this weather,' he thought stupidly, and coughed.

'Trofim, ah Trofim.'

'Yes, brother?' Trofim got up and faced the door. Nikolai sat on the bench so violently that the *rukavitzi* tumbled to the floor.

'You are going? I thought you would after that night at the hostel . . . You were a stranger then. You have been one since. Saboteur—that is what you are.' The foreign idiom fell clumsily from the bearded lips. 'Effort is too much for you. Work is too much for you. A good hard life is too much for you, so you must run away to a fool's prayers and wax candles . . .' He spat, fury stemming his speech.

Trofim said:

'It is time we ate, brother.'

He brought an earthenware bowl of stew to the table, cut two chunks off a huge rye *karavai*, placed the wooden spoons alongside the bowl, crossed himself, and sat down. Nikolai picked up his spoon, looked at it in hatred, and threw it against the oven. The room echoed with the sharp whistling sound of broken wood.

'For shame, brother. It was a good painted spoon—in Kostroma we bought it, when we had not many coppers to spare. It has served us many years.'

'What has a spoon to do with it? Are you a statue sipping your stew as if nothing had happened? Yes, I know, you said you would go. Mavra used to tell us witches rode on broomsticks. Did I believe her? It is not wax candles I mind,' somehow his candour

was more terrible than anger, and Trofim's spoon lay idle in the bowl, 'it is you. The womb held us together—that is not like melting snow, brother, it sticks. You are a man now. You have a will of your own, not a rag. And going to those who will twist your will as if it were hemp. Don't you dare to interrupt,' he shouted though Trofim sat still, his shaggy head bent. 'I know enough of those places. We should have smashed them all from the very beginning. Now they say it was counter-revolution we hunted there, and I say it is a lie. Counter-revolution is a dirty political game, and your wax candle foolery is worse—it is bondage, and you won't see it.' He banged his fist on the table, and Trofim's spoon almost leapt out of the bowl. 'To become a witless thing pushed here and there, to let white-bearded cowed dogs order you about as if you were a bear in a circus . . . And all for what?—to get a warm corner for your soul which does not exist, in a heaven which is not there either. Trofim, Troshka, Troshenka.'

His candour and fury went, giving place to something so terrible that Trofim kept his head bent and his hands clenched. 'If tomfoolery pleases you, go on with it, from the outside, in freedom. Keep your picture, go to your church . . . I have abused you and sworn at it all but I shall never interfere with you. Don't let it drown you. Trofim, ah Trofim . . .' And suddenly, terribly, he sank his head on the table and sobbed as if someone's hand had pressed him down and banished all the granite and wood out of him and left him, a balc of soft wool, a man with eyes to cry and a broken voice to go on pleading. 'Troshka, look what you have done to me. It is dark all over me. Troshka,' he raised his huge face, hair all over his eyes, his beard shook, his cheeks were crumpled . . .

'Nikolashka,' said Trofim, 'I am not a statue, I am a man. Don't go driving nails into me,' but he bent down, his arms round Nikolai's neck, his own tears running down Nikolai's hair, and then, just as swiftly, he seized his bundle and sheepskins and walked out of Tambov.

A fortnight later Trofim stood on a tiny island. The lake was

churning and whorling wildly. He dropped the axe, and the wind deafened the sound of iron against the ground. He thought the little boat would be safe at its moorings under a ledge along the shore, and he must wait and see the storm through. The wind had risen suddenly, it would fall just as swiftly, and then he would row back to the mainland, and run to vespers in the tiny brown-walled church, and then eat carrots and bread in the low-ceiled timbered room. Trofim liked that room though he did not know that it was old in the days when a Rurikovich first styled himself Tzar of Muscovy.

He chose a sheltered spot among the tall pines and sat down to watch the fury of the water. It looked as though some giants, living in the depths of the lake, had woken in bad temper, and now waved their arms below, tossing the water up and down in spirals of white-edged wild flounces.

Carrots and bread . . . He saw the narrow trestles, the tiny latticed windows, the dim tarnished shelf of the ancient ikons, the walls where history had been made, where centuries were folded one into another as simply as though they were mere instants, a pattern so old that it had newness, so unvaried that it gave room to endless changes. He saw the scene against the quiet he had known for years, and he felt so happy that he must needs sing the old song about the oak in the valley.

The afternoon was closing in, and the wind did not fall. It stiffened as if all the giants under the lake were resolved to continue their play. The lake was roaring. White edges were gone from the mountains of angry water, they were sheer black now, and Trofim edged nearer the tree. 'It is not likely to turn cold in the night,' he muttered, 'and they will send another boat in the morning. Praise be, I have cut enough timber.' He found his handkerchief with some bread and cold baked potatoes, and ate in the swiftly dwindling light until the whole world went dark.

The wind from the lake flung its mad orchestra over the tiny island. The wind dashed upon it from shore to shore, and the old trees groaned in rebellion. Above the wind's fury came the muffled

roar of a distant crash, and Trofim stiffened. To reassure himself he fumbled for the potatoes in his lap when another crash was upon him. His thoughts fell into confusion. His eyes ached in the utter black which surrounded him. 'Lord Christ, was it the boat going?' he wondered and reproached himself for not trying to find his way to the ledge, unaware that he could not move, imprisoned in the hideous tangle of trunk, boughs and branches. He opened his eyes widely. Now the dark was fretted with a myriad of tiny flickering lights, some pale golden, others fierily red. He closed his eyes again. He longed for the unbroken dark to come back, to fold him, and comfort him and keep him in its peace. The dark would pilot him back to the cell, and back to work, they were building new cow-byres in the yard . . . The dark might take him back to Nikolai, pickled cucumbers and rye bread on the clean scrubbed table at Tambov, the red-embroidered hem of a white towel, the room at the students' hostel, a boy with a scarred hand and a girl, her hair so red that it burnt. Her hair was like an Easter egg, or, better still, an Easter anthem. Let the New Jerusalem shine because the glory of the Lord had fallen on it . . .

He opened his eyes and watched those lights, he could not number their colours any more, they were too many, from palest blue and gold and rose to fiercest crimson and violet. They were not lights at all, he knew, they were gates, walls, turrets, and Nikolai was coming through a gate burning rose-red . . . The myriads of tiny lights rose, wove themselves together into a flaming crown, a hand he could not see had so woven them together, and in that burning crown lived a voice. 'I shall hear it this instant . . .' he thought, and then the lights flickered out, and the dark, all pardon, kindness and warmth, held him close.

At Kraspole they were talking about the old palace. 'It must soon be pulled down,' they said. The students' hostel had been given the worst damaged wing and now, with the years, it looked forsaken by God and man. Nikolai had never before seen it so desolate. The front door hung on its hinges, there were loose tiles in the

entrance hall, the windows were boarded up, and Nikolai must strike several matches before he came to the door of Kirill's new room. He found it empty.

He had never seen it before. The long narrow room wore the air of a tired woman gone into unnecessarily long mourning. The walls were dark with grime and dust. The ceiling still boasted its plaits of yellow silk, but the delicate colour looked a dingy brown here and there. The floor hid its broken inlay under a carpet of dust. There were two wide iron bedsteads, each with two pillows, some indeterminate clothing hung on pegs, a table, a rust-fretted iron stove, and a telephone.

Nikolai stared at a piece of mottled pink sausage. He stretched a hand and ate its hard peppery flesh. Having eaten, he stood lost and aimless. Kirill was not expecting him. He must wait. He pounced on a history of French literature and flung it down in disgust.

'Ah, good evening.'

A thin bespectacled youth, hunger stamped on his face and clothes, stood in the doorway.

'Kirill?'

'He won't be long. Supper is just over. Cabbage soup and noodles yesterday, today, and forever. Ever heard of Lucullus? We prefer to forget him. Well, life has never been easy, so why imagine the impossible? I must not miss my train. It is Lermontov's *Masquerade* in Leningrad. Have you seen it?'

'I never go. I work.'

'You should read Aristotle. He says one of the aims of the theatre is catharsis. Heaven knows, we all need it!'

'Is what?'

'Catharsis. I apologise—purge of the spirit, I suppose. Personally, I always leave the theatre cleansed of many irritants. Life teems with them. There are four of us in this room, two lecturers and two students, there should be distances, and space denies them. It is all rather tense.'

'And dull . . .'

'Never. Whether you make tractors, or study Tolstoi's texts, or

build latrines, there is no boredom. *Skuka* . . . What an inane word to use! I mean reality, not metaphysics. No, comrade, life is hard and hungry and tiring, but never dull. No *skuka* in it even if you are a bug on the wall . . .’ and he went, whistling.

‘I am not even that,’ muttered Nikolai. ‘I am glad they moved Kirill here. The beds are different. And the ceiling. *She* has never sat here.’ He raised his head and saw Kirill.

‘Well—’

Nikolai breathed hard.

‘I should have telephoned. Perhaps I should not have come. I am an oaf. I can’t manage a text book. I went to a lecture last night, metallurgics, and everything was Chinese to me . . .’

Kirill pulled a bottle of beer from under the bed.

‘You should get drunk and make yourself disgusting, and sleep, and, perhaps, shame might shake you. Here,’ he poured some beer into a lemonade bottle, ‘so you went to Pskov after all? Ever heard of salt rubbed into a cut finger? Why must you be such a blasted fool?’ he spoke gently, no longer a young man talking to another, but someone with years and experience weighing down his shoulders, talking to a bewildered hurt boy.

Nikolai gulped down his beer.

‘How could I tell you why I went there? I was so angry. Letting the lad go out in the boat and the wind strengthening! I told them so,’ he hissed, ‘cringing cowed Herods, treating him like a dog. I sat there in a room stinking of wax and incense, and I swore, Kirill, a whole string of oaths, and they never said a word. They brought food, I smashed one of the platters, and ate some fish. I would not speak any more. I felt choked. The old man came back and asked if I would like to stay the night. I never answered him. I got up to go and he said, “You look like your brother, citizen, and we loved him,”’ he clenched his fists, ‘they never knew Trofim. They just took him, and used him, and killed him.’

‘Stop it,’ said Kirill, ‘I can’t tell you why, but I felt all was well with Trofim. You will go on sitting in your bog until you learn it.

He was not one of us, he did not belong to you, he did not belong to himself. I could not understand it. I have always known it. Life is a damned tangle: you ask an apple of it and it gives you a thistle, but I think Trofim took his thistle for an apple and ate it gratefully, and perhaps it was not a thistle for him after all. Get a transfer, Nikolai. "Tambov" will send you to hell. Go to the Urals or to the South, but go—'

Nikolai's swollen eyes were fixed on the empty beer bottle.

'You say you never knew Trofim. Do you know me?'

'You have no subtlety, Nikolai. Don't look at me in such a way. We are not schoolboys sniggering in a corner. Dasha is happy with Gleb, and nothing else should be of importance.'

'Trofim is gone. Dasha is gone. Do you understand that? I could not talk. I could only look at her. Gleb can talk,' Nikolai sobbed, battered by his sense of inarticulacy, 'it is words, he caught her with words.'

Kirill fumbled in his pockets. He had very little money, he owed a fat sum at the canteen, his month's allowance was mortgaged ahead, but he went out and came back with vodka, herrings and cigarettes.

'You are leaving Kraspolc,' he spoke firmly. 'You are big, even if you are a fool. If you were not a fool, I would kick you out of the room. But I love you for being a fool. Drink,' he shouted at him, 'drink, lace your vodka with beer, get drunk, tumble on the bed, be sick if you like, and be a fool, but don't dare to imagine you are a pygmy. Only such get envy eating into them. Drink!' roared Kirill, 'stay the night if it pleases you. Drink hard, I can fetch some more beer, I want to see you drunk and sane and hard again!' He drained his own mug and refilled it. 'A dwarf can souse himself in envy. But you and I are big men, Nikolai. Drink harder!' He tossed back his head and laughed. 'I know—you would like to board the next train for Leningrad, a crowbar in your hands, and beat Gleb's head to a pulp, but that is a job for a mean little man, Nikolai. Drink, blast you! Is vodka too humble for you? I can't get champagne at the canteen, and it's raining and quite dark, and

the nearest *traktir* is too far. Here's another bottle! And, Nikolai, give me a promise—never go to a wedding, never discuss husbands and wives. Never put yourself into a small room. Eat this herring. Eat the bread. Eat the pleated silk off the ceiling . . .'

4

The hunchback *dvornik* was saying to Kirill:

'Now, citizen, you must be reasonable. I have sent for Comrade Utina. She may come in five minutes, she may come in half an hour. This is an academy, not a railway station. It is early yet, they may all be busy,' he glanced at Kirill very severely. 'They work hard enough. All yesterday they were helping with the timber at the docks, and the week before it was flour or coal, I think, somewhere else. Yes, busy they are, and it may well be an hour before she comes out. You can wait in my little hole, if you like, though the weather is pleasant, and a young man like you should not get tired. Look at me, sixty-seven I am, and not a grey hair, and people say "Kuzma, you are young enough to fight",' he broke off, 'here she comes, hurrying like a she-goat. Mercy upon us, clay all over her hands and face. They work in clay, citizen,' he shook his tousled head, and Kirill moved away.

'Whatever is the matter?'

Dasha stood, a blue coat flung over her overall, hair tumbled about her face.

'An impulse . . . anything,' he shrugged, 'you have travelled since the evening I met you and you so stupidly invented an uncle. But you have not travelled far enough. Is there anywhere we could eat? I can't talk on an empty stomach, and I drank hard last night. Never mix vodka with beer, Dasha.'

'There is the *Poor Dog*. Dirty and bleak, but they give you decent cabbage soup and rice patties.'

He walked beside her, hands in the pockets of his frayed coat. At the *Poor Dog* the soup came in chipped pottery mugs, and the

patties in a basket genteelly covered by a piece of blue-checked cloth.

'You can have them all,' said Dasha. 'Impulse or not, it is good seeing you. Gleb is drowned in work. It is the book on post-1917 literature. One night he woke up, frightened that he would never finish it. There was nothing I could say. I just looked at him . . .' she smiled at the cabbage soup. 'He says I help him by not saying the obvious things.'

'You never did. You were awkward and annoying, and you told futile fibs, but you were never obvious,' Kirill toyed with a bent tin fork. 'Well, here is the impulse which is not an impulse. Nikolai has gone to the Urals. This morning. It was not only Trofim's death,' he filled his mouth with hard stale pastry and said almost casually, 'I am afraid I urged him to go. I am not betraying him. You see—it is also you, and you never knew . . .'

Dasha had asked for blackcurrant jam and tea, and now sat frowning at the tiny saucer, the small round spoon idle in her fingers.

'He is gone? Then why tell me?'

'You never knew . . .'

'Kirill, have you ever answered a question in your life? No, I did not know. He made me uncomfortable—all of you did at first. At the hostel he just sat and stared. When we met outside, he was so much like a widowed bear, and how could I guess?' she passed her hand over a flushed face, and the clay smear on her right cheek grew bigger. 'He never approved of the Golden Cockerel. He was rude when I tried to tell him about it. He talked steel, Kirill, and I never understood him. I had just one talk only with Trofim, it was fine, a cherry-tree laden with fruit, but with Nikolai,' she shrugged, 'you merely rubbed your mind against steel and slogans and more steel. So why tell me?'

'Not all steel,' Kirill snatched at the saucer and ate jam by the spoonfuls, 'you did not seem to want it,' he said almost accusingly, 'no, not all steel, just a man, a bear, if you like, but a man for all that. He went, leaving a note for me. That is why I am here, wasting

my time and missing three lectures. You might look grateful and order some more jam. It was a clumsy letter. He said he loved you and would never come into your life unless you needed him. He said he had begun to imagine he could not live without you, but, now going away, he saw that, loving you, he could live.'

'You are a poor liar, Kirill. You put it all into Nikolai's mind. You are so clever, and you told him a lie to comfort him.'

'Where is the lie?'

'I don't know. If you loved anyone, you could not do without them. But why tell me? Why hammer it all at me? You have always mocked me. Now you are making me angry. If you love, you live in it. That is terrible and also simple. It is not a tangled knot. It is clear.'

'I said you have not travelled enough. You still think a personal hold and a personal possession are indispensable.'

'Why tell me now?' she insisted.

'To make you richer. He is gone, he is not likely to come near you ever again. Yes, I am telling it you to make you richer.'

'I am too rich,' she cried proudly, 'I have Gleb.'

'Yes,' he said slowly, scooping out the last fragments of jam from the shallow saucer, 'you have Gleb, but have you ever thought of beauty hidden elsewhere, in doing without—and never mind what it is—a mirror, a clean towel, tea on a winter morning, or a man's love?'

'But that is—Trofim.'

'Perhaps,' he shrugged, 'I used to dislike him, condemn all I called regression, but I am not sure. You can't live fitly without some denial or other, we are all hedged in by some necessity—having to do without—that is what makes for strength.'

She was not listening.

'Let us pay,' she rose, tugging at her collar, 'I must get back.'

They stood outside. An exquisitely painted girl in a small white hat passed and stared at the clay on Dasha's face. Kirill smiled and said:

'You look angry. I don't mean to apologise. I meant you to know. It will make you richer some day. If you had seen Nikolai you

would have understood even if he had just sat and stared,' he went on conversationally, telling her about Kraspole, the new building schemes, the sad state of the hostel, and something in Dasha made brief answers, her feet went along the pavement, her hand was finally clasped in Kirill's thin fingers. Now she was crossing the huge cobbled yard, running up the stairs to the fifth floor, down the wide passage and, after all her hurry, she opened the door very slowly, afraid to find the room empty, and when she saw Gleb, her voice failed her, and she halted, hating herself for the fear and the foolishness.

'Really,' said Gleb, 'must you leave the academy with hands like these?' he touched her fingers and smiled at her face, and she whispered:

'There was no time at all.'

'I must work till supper,' he turned back to the table, and she sat down, almost holding her breath, blessing the bare pale walls because they held him.

'Daria Petrovna!' gasped the old professor on hearing that Donatello was influenced by Bernini, and Dasha blushed and stammered an audible apology.

'Do you call that a face?' shouted the little bearded man in the crowded studio. 'It is a bun kneaded by a drunken baker. What is the matter with you?' and Dasha had nothing to say.

She was a state student, she must spend certain hours at the academy, move from studio to lecture hall and canteen, and back to studio again, sit on committees, give advice about the wall newspaper, join in discussions on exhibitions and excursions, take her appointed place in that enormous beehive of study and work, and she did all those things in a halved, blurred way, missing here a lecture, there a committee, spending criminally idle hours in the studio, dirtying her hands with the clay she could not use. One thought alone was deeply lodged in her mind: 'Is Gleb all right? He is catching the tram to the library . . . He is beginning a lecture . . . He is in seminar . . .'

When she was back in their room, and he happened to be out, all wish for activity left Dasha. An unread book in her lap, she sat on the crimson sofa, straining her ears for the least sound outside, all of her a lump of aching expectancy. When he was back, she came to life so suddenly that he never knew of the burden upon her lone hours. Work sang in her hands, domestic chores never wearied her. The thought wove a musical phrase in her mind: 'He is here in this room. If I stretched a hand, I could touch him. If he raised his head, I could see his eyes. Kirill's words were mad, cruel. I want life, and my life is Gleb.' And sometimes Dasha strolled about the university grounds, ventured into the damp vaulted cloisters, and scanned the roughly typed announcements. The faculty thought much of Gleb, his name appeared so often, and her heart burnt with pride. Once she passed a cluster of shabby earnest students, and heard one of them complain:

'Damn them! They would fix that football match on Wednesday!'

'Aren't you going?'

'And miss Krylov's lecture? Have you got hay in your head?'

Dasha heard from Kraspole. Miss Thompson hoped for a visit. Lev Kirillich had not been well. Frossia longed for some news of her work. Dasha replied briefly. 'I am so busy. The second year is always strenuous.' She could not explain—even to Frossia—that she was living in a cloister. Even the great river looked a stretch of ordinary water when Gleb was not with her. The careless rhythm of summer months gave place to the more serious songs of autumn, roofs, parks and gardens lived through their hour of burning colour until the winter came and stilled the coloured flame, and urged its own theme upon the blue-grey city. Far away from university, factory and club, far away, over the frontier, the European scene was being clothed in one dark shadow after another. Dasha read 'Pravda,' listened to the wireless, heard people talk and wonder, but Gleb was in her world, and her peace could not be shattered by rumours or distant shadows.

She woke suddenly as if a needle were thrust into her arm and sat up to see Gleb on the edge of the sofa, a grey coat over his shirt, his feet bare, his eyes on the floor.

'*Golubchik*,' her glance fell on the blue-faced clock, 'we have overslept.'

He said slowly: 'I have not slept at all. I am very tired.'

'It is late. You have a lecture at nine.'

'I could not give a lecture. I have nothing to talk about. I feel tired. Can't you see how tired I am?'

The sunlight was warm, they had begun the central heating, but still she shivered. Kirill had once warned her: 'He just slips into the dark. All power, all desire and recognition, everything leaves him. It is no use calling a doctor. It is a psychiatry case. They can't help him without his own response, and he has always refused it. It does not come often. If it should happen, don't lose your head. He drinks cold water by the gallon and sleeps.' Kirill had warned her, but Dasha had hoped that her passion and the sense of all her world being in him would have succeeded in weaving a strong protective mesh for him, in lodging him within a sanctuary where no wounding shadows from the past could come to hurt him again. She had not succeeded. He was her world, her shining, and he seemed gone from her, stumbling down a path where she might not follow him, and frightened, bewildered, she was not certain how to face it. Gleb sat still, face bent, bare toes touching the floor. She stirred, got some hot water, made the tea, and carried a glass to him. He refused it so violently that the glass rolled out of her hands, all but scalding her own bare feet.

'Poison,' he spoke thickly, 'take it away. I want cold water. It must be pure. I want a bucket of it. Can't you see—I am so tired and thirsty . . .'

Dasha seized their biggest jug, ran to the taps on the landing, and brought him the water. But he sat so still that she dared not intrude on him. His eyes stared past her, his hands clenched hard, and she knew he was looking at the dreadful unlit caverns of his childhood's years, and she also knew that even though she were to die in her love

and pity, neither could reach him and draw him back, and somehow her very feeling of helplessness urged her to simple things. She washed and dressed, used the floor telephone to send precisely worded messages to the University and the Academy, remembered that they had neither milk nor bread, and begged the big burly *dvornik* to do an errand for her.

When she came back, Gleb was drinking water. His hands seemed steady enough. He lay down on the sofa and turned his face to the wall. She knew she was not there for him, and steelled herself to keep away when she heard him say in a low pleading voice:

'I could not walk another *arshin*,' he turned his tousled head and smiled at a chair, and the smile froze her heart. 'I might get you some bread later on. It is always easier to steal at night. But don't make me walk another *arshin* until I have slept a little. When I sleep, keep away from Kolka, Vanka. He is so small, poor little Kolka, and you are vile, Vanka. Put that knife into your pocket,' the voice grew thicker, 'it is silly, Vanka, I am not afraid of knives. You must not, you must not open this coffin. It does not look old enough. Look, even the wood has not rotted . . . and it is damp enough here. Aleshka, if you had a heart, you would stay by me. Else the rats might come. Never mind, I shall sleep . . .'

He slept. The small blue-faced clock ticked on. The sun played on the bare walls, on the tea spilt on the floor, on the table strewn with books and papers. The sun fell on Dasha, her flaming hair and ashen face, on the faded blue dress, the feet in their shabby little felt slippers, one toe clumsily patched with dark blue serge. The sun fell across her face, but she did not move. And Gleb slept—not in the quiet ordinary room with its islands of sunlight speckling the floor, with the books he loved scattered about him. He slept in a damp vault where coffins could be opened, where rats scuttled, and knives gleamed in the light of a tallow candle stuck into a bottle, its neck clipped off, where children, who had never known childhood, herded and slept and prowled, their minds as dark as the dripping lichened walls around them. There Gleb slept, and Dasha sat still, learning in that stillness the various threads of the fantastic structure

she had built about him and herself, its fabric of a thinner substance than a summer cloud. Now he was gone from her, neither her pity nor passion could touch him, her very absorption in him wore a dress which hung so clumsily upon her. She saw it all now, and yet knew that, neither reaching nor holding, she had him. She must wait while he slept, and be ready to hear more of the nightmare talk later on, but she found things to do, stockings to darn, and a shirt of his to patch and, her hands occupied with the very common work, Dasha began once again seeing the sunlit boundaries of the world she had left in her ill-mapped quest: the peasant festival relief she was doing, the faces of other students, the leonine head of Boris Andreevich, and the eyes of Frossia.

Gleb awoke late in the afternoon. He was white and tired, but Dasha's heart sang when she heard his ordinary voice:

'It was a bad headache, there was nothing for it but sleep. Now I am hungry. Let us go to the *Poor Dog*—cabbage soup and apple doughnuts.'

'Not the *Poor Dog* today. Could you wait? The *sudki* is big enough to hold dinner for two, and I can run to the *stolovaya* at the corner . . .' And she ran, and the girl filled the enamelled *sudki* with mushroom soup and potato cutlets fried a warm brown. 'You are too late for anything else, *grajdanka*,' she said reproachfully. 'You might have had liver done in onions or meat *kloetzki*. But you come so late. Well, I might give you a piece of walnut *halva* for a sweet,' she added, and looked at the *sudki*. 'Where is the lid? Lost it? Well, if you are honest, I might lend you a lid, but it must come back tomorrow. It is a cold day, I would hate you to eat the dinner all cold. You are funny . . .' she laughed. 'Have you been to a circus? Your eyes are shining so. Here, *grajdanka*, you must pay and you might thank me for the lid—'

Dasha put the heavy *sudki* on the floor, leant across the wide, wet counter, and kissed the fat red face. :

'Come from a circus,' the girl almost staggered back, 'I should say you are *in* a circus. I say, you won't be mad enough to forget the lid? They are expensive.'

'No, no . . . no . . . I shall bring it back at once.'

'We close in ten minutes. Don't be foolish. Bring it back tomorrow and tell me about your circus. Is it the one from the Ninth Line? I have heard of it. You have four elephants, haven't you?'

'Seven,' replied Dasha and vanished.

They ate on the floor, soup, cutlets, *halva* and tea. Suddenly Gleb leapt to his feet.

'Some seminar fellows are coming. Will it bore you? I might take them to the club?'

'It won't bore me at all,' Dasha wrapped up the precious lid in a newspaper, she wanted to add and dared not 'Nothing will ever bore me now . . .' and she went to the communal kitchen to wash the *sudki* and the plates. The place was full, and she must wait her turn for the hot water, but even the ordinary scene pleased her, she felt like dancing about the gloomy, steamy red-bricked kitchen, and she wished she might jump on the big wooden tub in the middle, wave a spoon over their heads, and shout: 'I had lost something. I have found it even while it remained lost. Do you understand? A friend of mine once said that everything is possible in our country—even the impossible . . .' but she restrained herself and smiled, and waited her turn.

She came back to find three earnest young men in the room. They leapt to their feet and bowed. Gleb smiled at Dasha but did not introduce them.

'You see,' he caught her hand and held it, 'Art has neither mercy nor peace. If you follow it, you must be ready to starve and freeze, and bury ambition so deep down that nobody must see it.'

'An individual way,' said one of the young men. 'There must be some other. That is not the way to continue building Russia.'

'No. Perhaps not. That is not the way to build a wonder city in the Urals, but there are other things, you must have a complement to steel and oil.'

'Well, a rightly developed social consciousness—'

'Have I been teaching you for two years for nothing that you must shower such labels on me?' shouted Gleb. 'It is the living word

I am concerned with, and that can't express just steel and oil and more steel.'

'It must touch them.'

'You are out of date, Savonov. It did touch them, and it shrivelled. Don't you remember the First Five Year Plan? All our minds were set to that tune, we borrowed its themes, we wrote novels about steel girders and dams, and poems beating to the rhythm of tractors. Well? Dams and tractors remained as great as before, but the written word shrank to absurdities,' Gleb cried, no longer tired or tethered, but so living that Dasha wished she might hide her face in the wall cupboard, and then just as suddenly he turned to the young men and dismissed them:

'Tomorrow at nine, citizens. I have not been well today.'

'Just like a hammer,' murmured Dasha when the door closed. 'They accept all your brusqueness as though it were an egg cutlet for lunch.'

'They are used to it. Dasha, the whole of my college work is like your "Rye", weary, sagging shoulders, a great burden to carry, and something wildly joyful in one's heart. You, too, look burdened often enough, and you are at your loveliest then—'

'I must wash up.'

'And I will read Blok to you.'

'Gleb, you can't read poetry in a communal kitchen—and after midnight!'

'You need not go there. You can dry things with a towel, or merely leave them—Kirill would say. We shall be drinking tea out of the same mugs tomorrow, so why labour unnecessarily? I did not mean to read poetry—only a few fragments from his diary, because I feel a prophet tonight, and he was another. Here is a dish-cloth,' he tossed a clean face towel at her, and rustled the pages. 'Listen, you must listen . . . "Ours are great days. We seem to stand in a place where all the threads of the spirit are woven together, and all sounds can be heard. Back to the soul, not merely to the man, but to the whole man—spirit and soul and body. From medieval days to Turgenev and Dostoevsky the main theme of Russian literature

has been religion . . .” he covered the page with his hand and smiled at Dasha, ‘I know all of it sounds as tidy as pieces of beef in the Strogonov dish, but you are so lovely, Dasha, you never pester me for explanations,’ he turned a few more pages, ‘you cannot write until you have found the link between “the temporal and the extra-temporal”. Dashenka, a lesser man would have said “eternal”, but Blok knew so well the strength of gradations in words, his thought was too clear for the least verbal slovenliness . . . And he could also say “The world is beautiful in its despair—which is no paradox . . .” Dashenka, that is what I am trying to make them see in seminar, lecture hall, and individually, only my own words are so clumsy sometimes, I feel wooden and limited, but I know that some day it will all be together for you and me and the whole people—the ugly and the lovely woven into a closely meshed texture, and something is being born every day when you feel lost, and find a new stronger self in your very lostness, or when some cruelty smites you, and you learn to see an unhappy blinded mind behind the hurt dealt out to you, and you deepen in your understanding. I don’t know . . .’

‘You do know,’ she said gravely, ‘and you do find words so often.’ And suddenly she let go a plate, and pale pink fragments were scattered all over the floor, and Gleb staring at them said:

‘It—it looks just like the remnants of a canteen pasty on a Monday,’ and both forgot Blok and poetry, and laughed because, as Dasha said, one of the fragments looked exactly like the nose of an old woman street sweeper near Nicholas Bridge. ‘Just too pale, perhaps, but the shape is right—a potato slivered off with a very blunt knife.’

There came a loud indignant knock.

‘Really, citizens, have you no clock in your room? It is almost one in the morning. Would you like me to fetch the house manager? Anyway, I am determined to send a written complaint. It is tiresome enough to listen to loud laughter by daytime, but when it happens in the night. My nerves are bad and my digestion is terrible. You have disturbed me most unkindly—’

'It is old Butuzova,' whispered Dasha and raised her voice. 'I apologise, Matrena Danilovna. Would you like some peppermint essence?'

'Certainly not. I would never accept drugs from strangers. I buy my own peppermint essence from the chemist, *grajdanka*. But I must have quiet. The doctors said my nerves were too bad to put up with noise. Of course, you are so young you would not understand it, but you must excuse me—I shall send a complaint to the house manager. You need not open the door,' said the fat angry voice, 'I am going now,' and the slippered feet shuffled away.

Gleb and Dasha tiptoed about the room, fingers to their lips. The passage stayed quiet till the stillness was broken by the plaintive yapping of a dog.

'She can't complain to us,' whispered Gleb, putting the light out. 'Who does the dog belong to?'

'Old Butuzova,' answered Dasha.

5

At Kraspole the morning came in a soft pale-blue dress, and, through the great ruined gates of the park the half-dismantled palace looked all the sadder in the clean light. The old walls, their windows gaping, window-frames already gone, the roof above them stripped of its tiles, each and all were whispering to the morning: 'You should not have come so early. I prefer the dark. Everything should be buried in the dark, and I am so near my burial, and the light is cruel. I can't give shelter to any human being, I can never again echo song and laughter. My dancing hour is over, and I must have the dark around me . . .' but the men who were pulling it down slept far away from the park, and, if they had heard the plaint, they would not have hurried with their work. To demolish any building was a sad and solemn business and, as such, it demanded time for meditation.

That was the old way, the pre-Petrine way, the condemned way,

Kirill and many others would have said, and the fussy freckled foreman sweated, spat, cursed, and spat again, and threatened to report the men. But the quiet, middle-aged groovy men knew that the demolition of an unimportant ruin at a place like Kraspole was too negligible a matter for high authorities to be interested in. So the men freely spat in their turn, chewed sunflower seeds and rye rusks, watched blue and fawn-breasted pigeons strut on weed-covered lawns, discussed the papers, and worked as the spirit of slowness moved them.

'Give us a pig-sty to build, brothers, and the work would burn in our hands. Pulling a palace down is a different kind of *kasha*. Come on, Perka, fetch us some beer. There it is, steady does it, brothers. When you hurry, people mock at you. Ech, you, Semka, what are you running for? Is there a fire to watch or what? Has frost come into your yard? The devil take you for hurrying! Such work is not like a wolf—it won't run away into the wood. Come on, Vanka, take those window-frames to the gates. The foreman said so. Someone is sure to take them away. Good wood, brothers, all scrolled. Careful with those frames, Vanka. What do you think you are carrying—a sack of potatoes to the market!'

And the work went on, like a slowly crooned song by the fire-side, all through the day hours. But now it was too early, and the dying palace was whispering alone in the morning. The pigeons heard it, and starlings, and rooks, but its ghosts, themselves dead and remote, stayed indifferent. The dying palace was whispering alone of the indignity meted out to it, and nobody heard it. The half-broken walls were dreaming of a fire to burn its splendour swiftly and beautifully, or else wishing that the machine-guns, once hidden in the park, might have accomplished much more than they did. That was of little consequence, however, and the weed-carpeted paths and the untidy avenues welcomed the morning as they had done for nearly two hundred years.

The trees would not join in the plaint of the palace: the trees were living their own life, occupied with their own growing, flowering, and dying, and the trees ringed round the great palace,

themselves untouched by man's hand, aloof as though they knew that a new venture would soon come and flower among them: children were coming to Kráspole, children to live at an open-air school, for their faces to get rose-pink and their lungs to become whole. The trees rustled not in answer to the plaint of the palace but in welcome to the children who were to come.

And away from the park, down Dubovaya, in her tiny bare room, Miss Thompson lay asleep and dreamt of the palace and the park dug all over with hurriedly planned trenches. A bugle blew, the sharp dry rapping of a machine-gun came through a broken window, and old-fashioned double-barrelled carbines glinted in the sun. 'Hot work,' muttered one of the carbines, 'but we shall hold them, Comrade Lena. Hey, where do you think you are going—dressed up in a woman's clothes?' and in her sleep Miss Thompson answered: 'Why, to the great military review in Leningrad. I have been waiting and waiting for this day . . . And they won't mind my coming in civilian clothes.' And then the bugle ceased, a man came along with a pannikin of stewed horseflesh and millet, and his face was scarred and kindly, and the air smelt of sweat, dust and smoke, and a hoarse voice shouted: 'The review. Why, you will have to fly to Leningrad if you mean to be there in time . . .' and Miss Thompson woke up, frightened and dazed.

It was late, and she must hurry, but her fingers would not obey her, and she took a long time over her buttons. 'I am old,' she thought with disgust, polishing her old brown shoes, 'and so is Lev. It may be a great day, the year's review, but there we go, the two of us, just to watch it, two idle and aged onlookers,' and she did not even smile at Lev Kirillich's snow-white shirt.

'I ought not to be going,' she grumbled, making tea in a small green pot, 'Levushka, I shall feel useless and crushed,' she looked up and noticed his eyes, and reproached herself at once.

She had not been to Leningrad for years, and now the incredibly changed pace of the city's life bewildered her. The traffic and the crowds made her conscious of her pre-war coat and skirt and her uncertain gait. The city, she thought, looked as beautiful as before,

but it had an air of indifference as if the busy hurrying crowds had absorbed all of its attention, and Miss Thompson's mood was clouded until Lev Kirillich whispered:

'Look, Lena, the Vladimir Barracks. Do you remember the week we spent there—just a pound of bread and a handful of millet!'

'Yes, yes, and here is that window. Do you remember the room where the stove was broken and the door hung on its hinges, and the boy who tried to teach you French, and said he was never hungry when he starved?'

She straightened her shoulders, and walked briskly, and her face had light in it. The city was not a stranger, it still beckoned with familiar landmarks. Its cobbled streets might indeed hurt old and poorly shod feet, but its grace had enough alms to give to any hungry spirit, and Miss Thompson laughed and joked, and knew she had come to the beginning of a great day, and Lev Kirillich's own face cleared as he watched her mount the few steps to Swan Canal Bridge.

They came early enough, though clusters of people were already surging up from the broad avenues of the Summer Gardens across the tiny whimsical bridge once built for the pleasure of court ladies. The great spaces of the gardens looked pale green and dimly golden where the interlocked branches of old limes fell apart and let islands of sunlight fall on the ground. Ahead of them the huge square looked all the bigger for its emptiness. At its end men were busy draping tribunes with folds of bright scarlet, and Miss Thompson thought it looked like molten sealing-wax, so intense and startling was the colour. Further away, the pale walls of the old Marble Palace looked dimly roseate in the shade.

The crowd grew. White-bloused hawkers stole in and out, their shrill voices offering cabbage and onion patties, lemonade, poppy-flower seed, sunflower seed sold in tiny yellow bags, ice cream, small flags, gaudily coloured pictures of Stalin, Red Army generals, and Stalin again.

'Gingerbread, gingerbread, good gingerbread!' a pink-faced woman elbowed her way through, a wooden tray hung from her

neck. 'It won't be over till dinner-time, *golubushka*,' she said to Miss Thompson, 'have a piece, you would not get anything better if you went to Viazma.'

'Lemonade, *grajdanka*! The best "gascuse" . . .'

A fat woman in a red blouse leant against the bridge parapet, eating a chicken-leg. She smiled at Lev Kirillich:

'From Novia Derevna, *batushka*,' she said, licking her fingers, 'walking is a hungry job, but my lad is over there—' a red-sleeved arm gestured towards the bridge 'and he said to me "you will be there". He is twenty-two,' she said proudly, 'in the machine-guns . . . Married last year,' she grew confidential, 'his wife is expecting next month. That is a joy, *batushka*. A good girl, from Stalingrad her folk are. She is down there now. But Kolia is here. Twenty two . . .' Her small brown eyes went wistful, 'I had never thought I could bring him up. In the famine he was born, *batushka*, I could not carry him more than seven months, and I could not nurse him. Those were the days . . .'

'Where do you come from?'

'Kalinin, *golubchik*. Not much of a crust was there in those days!'

'Nor anywhere,' said Miss Thompson, her lips set again.

The woman from Kalinin finished her chicken and edged away nearer to the bridge. The glare grew, the heat grew, the noise grew. Beyond the oblong island of colour, movement and chatter, the pale empty square stayed uncannily still. The tribunes were draped, banners and standards were hoisted up red-painted posts. A few slender streaks of silver flashed across the dark blue sky as the planes went over towards the river, but they flew so high that the noise of their engines went unnoticed by the crowd. Somewhere in its heart they saw Vassia and Praskovia in a startling green muslin frock with a huge scarlet bow for a buttonhole, and further still Gleb and Dascha, small and flushed, all in white, her flaming hair uncovered. There were Frossia and Olga Petrovna, but none of them could get together, they waved and smiled at one another, and then all sound and movement ceased in the crowd. Even the importunate ice-cream men stopped manœuvring their green dome-shaped carts.

From far away, across the river, came the opening phrases of a march as the massed bands began crossing the bridge. The crowd heaved, stirred and sighed, and then kept still. There seemed little else in the world except the sun, the empty, freshly sanded space of the square, the nervous urgent beating of drums, and the still black figures on the tribune.

'Coming . . . Coming . . .'

The crowd was not shouting but whispering slowly, drawing the word out. And Dasha could see nothing except the generous washes of sunlight over a blurred moving sea of green-yellow. She thought, 'What is the matter with them—and with me? I can see Frossia, her face is a flower, and Olga Petrovna is weeping, and Miss Thompson looks younger than I am, and I know Gleb is thinking of a poem. . . . What is the matter? We are all so used to processions and music. I had not even wanted to come, and now it all seems different. I am in the music, and in those marching feet, and in the planes overhead, even in the sand and that gingerbread tray. Oh, my fingers are sticky,' and she smiled at Gleb, but Gleb did not see her.

They were coming now, the men, the horses, the armoured vehicles, mass upon mass, wave after wave, capped and helmeted heads turning towards the scarlet tribune. A fussy little civilian behind Dasha kept whispering the names of various regiments. 'Stop it!' she wished she might say, 'what do names matter? They are all one, and they are us, and why I don't know at all, and I don't want to know. I am increly alive and here and seeing it all, and I am glad of it. Please don't talk.'

'Levushka,' Miss Thompson whispered, clutching Lev Kirillich's arm, 'that is an army! And remember Tzaritzin, twenty years ago! No cartridges, no guns, no boots! Never enough boots, Levushka . . .'

'Never enough boots, Lena,' he echoed.

The Uzbek regiment filed past, small, shaggy, gold-brown horses, men splashed with burning colour, short daggers glinting. More guns, more infantry in soberly serried ranks. A horse neighed.

The sand crunched. A machine-gun unit passed, and Lev Kirillich caught a glimpse of the red-bloused woman. She was standing, hunger and pride in her face, tears dimming her eyes. Her Kolia, born and bred in the famine years, was among those tanned, broad-shouldered men. The wind stirred the scarlet banners, and the bands went on playing marches which unscrolled history. The Cossacks went by, man and horse sculpted together, a rainbowed rampart of them, white fur and silver braid shining against yellow and green, blue and crimson cloth of their tunics, and Dasha wished that time would stop, gather the whole pagantry far away into some incredible satisfying timelessness, making it all immortal because it asked for immortality.

At some distance from her stood Frossia, her arm through Olga Petrovna's, but Frossia was silent.

'Let it be over soon,' she prayed, 'I could not bear much more of it. There is an answer in all these faces, all this movement. An answer to something I have watched for years—at college, in the country, in factories. Here you can't escape it. How young they seem, all in their twenties or early thirties. Dear God, all of them with a hungry and tattered childhood behind them. Igor was right, and that old peasant was right. I have forgotten his name. He said "All corn will be ground in the end . . ." Well, we have ground the corn, it had so much chaff in it, many said it was quite rotten, but the flour is fine . . .'

The last of the ranks had gone by. A band behind the tribune played the International, and then broke into a final march but the crowd was in no mood for formal music. It longed for a song. Somewhere, from among the tall old lines of the Summer Gardens, a man's lusty voice flung the opening phrase at the crowd, and they seized upon it. The crowd became one voice, one urgency, one pride, and from far away, the last units of the army, the militiamen by the bridge, the men from the boats on the Neva, anyone who had a throat to use, one and all flung their very souls into the simple refrain:

'To strāna, strāna nāya rodnāya . . .'

'That is my land, my very own land.'

Dasha's heart opened to the word, it had the whole pageantry in it, and something timeless also. *Rodnáya*, it meant more than father-land, *rodnáya* land, father and mother together to her children, all things to them and always from the battle-scarred, dim-minded medieval Rus to a great union of 185 peoples. *Rodnáya*, sang Dasha again and again, her left hand clutched in a hawker's calloused fingers, her right clasping Frossia's, and she knew she was crying, and they were all crying because the word took them into the very heart of the land, their own land. *Rodnáya*. Her work was in the word, and Frossia's, and Gleb's, and the militiamen's cordoning the bridge, and Boris Andreevich explaining the Renaissance sculpture, and the freckled Upravdom swearing at a tenant, and the men who dug wells and built in stone and steel, and the men among whom Trofim had chosen to die, those who concerned themselves with atoms and with stars, and men like Lev Kirillich, who carved toys and made little clocks, and tilled the land, and ground the corn . . . The northern sternness of Kraspolé and Leningrad, the wild hot abandon of oleander groves in the Crimea, the desolation of the tundra, and the winter glory of the tayga east of the Urals, were in it. 'All, all *rodnáya*,' sang Dasha, clutched the hawker's fingers tighter and tighter, and knew that the crowd was with her because the refrain went on and on long after the band had gone and the freedom of the square was given to the people.

Olga Petrovna wept, aware that the word would not fail as password in the dimmest, bleakest village she had known.

'I can't bear so much happiness. I feel drowned in it. Frossia, let us go and take a boat and go on the Neva. I can't say anything. I have sung myself out.'

The hawker, his eyes moist, offered lemonade:

'*Na moy schet*, on the house, citizens.'

It was tepid and over-sugared, but they all drank it gratefully. In the distance the red-bloused woman from Kalinin was saying to a militiaman: 'Yes, *karmiletz*, born in the famine he was, my Kolja, and he will be a serjeant next year.'

Dasha sought Gleb's eyes.

'Tired?'

'Nekrassov was there,' she replied, 'and everybody else, even the man who wrote about Igor's Host, and those who wrote those early chronicles and the Wanderings of Danilo, all of them together in the marching and the music, in all of it. Now I know!'

Miss Thompson walked down Millionaya Street, her shoulders very rigid. She and Lev Kirillich were going back to the station, and they walked in great and worthy company.

'Never enough boots, Levushka.'

'Yes, but some of the lads were clever with bast, Lena. Remember Pavlushka in my company, such good soles he made, you could tramp for versts and not wear them out.'

Miss Thompson remembered Pavlushka. She remembered others. The platform at the Baltisky station was crowded with the people they mentioned. The train carried them all the way to Kraspole, they followed Miss Thompson and Lev Kirillich down Dubovaya Street.

'Dreadful days, Levushka, but clean.'

'Sowing days those were, Lena,' and he limped away to the barn with the sky-blue walls.

'Sowing days,' she murmured, alone in her bare little room, and slept, tired and glad of the day.

chapter seven

SUNSET OVER THE NEVA

I

THAT hot summer of 1939 a change came over Igor. Frossia saw it. Neither of them would remark on it. As the uneasy sultry weeks slipped by, he looked more and more tired as though the apple-tree cottage, the small rooms, his tools, the whole of that simple environment were moving away from him and it

meant an effort to come near them, to stay among them. His hands were tired, he said, and Frossia told Lev Kirillich that Igor could no longer plane the supports for the wooden horses, nor make the little boxes Miss Thompson later painted all the colours of the rainbow.

Igor no longer worked, but Frossia knew that idleness of spirit never came near him. He sat in his chair by the window, remembering, thinking, and listening. There was much to listen to, he told Frossia, a sparrow on the window-sill, a car down the street, a voice singing in the lane beyond, a plane in the sky and, finally, the simpler homelier sounds of his immediate world: a door opening, a board creaking, a neighbour's voice telling him about some freshly gathered mushrooms, the slow rhythm of the clock behind him, and all the innumerable sounds which went to the making of their garden orchestra.

He listened. He remembered. Frossia had a consciousness that his very memories were no longer so many separate leaves in a tidily bound book: they were together, all clasped by a new quality of timelessness. He talked of his early days when, a small grocer in an unimportant townlet, he learnt his lessons by the light of a tallow candle, and he talked of their shared years, and Frossia realised that the two stages were somehow welded into one in his mind.

But he spoke seldom now even to Frossia. His very mouth looked tired in the evenings. He was thinking much.

Day by day, and week by week, he was learning that his house of flesh was close to the running out of its tenure, and the knowledge warmed him strangely as if he felt being drawn closer and closer to the heart of some great truth he knew he would see before the evening folded itself all over him. As was usual with him, his thought took shape slowly and clumsily. Whenever he had Frossia with him, her strong fingers clasping his, he spoke of ordinary enough things, their friends, Dasha's latest success at the academy, a tree, a flower, the sky's careless colour in the twilight, his day's small measured needs, and what fragments of Kraspole daily chronicle may have reached him during her absence.

'They have finished pulling down the palace. They have been a long time at it. Lev Kirillich says they mean to turn the park into an open-air school for children. They will start building tiny huts very soon. Frossia, we must have Olga Petrovna down here for the opening. She is so happy about these forest schools.'

She in her turn gave him brief narratives of her own day, staged in street, market place, tramcar, train, and lecture hall.

'Irina Burloкова has got her thesis out on Baudelaire. Imagine, Igor, seventeen years ago I taught her mother the French alphabet, and could she master it? Not for months and months! She was over thirty then, a factory hand from a place by Narva Gate, and her little Irina will be a doctor of literature before very long . . .'

'The ninth of your pupils to get a doctorate. And you have no degree at all, and seventeen years ago, my little soul, *dushenka*, you imagined you could not teach at all, and you thought me so hard for keeping you at it.'

July stormed Kraspole with its scents and its dazzling colour, and day by day Frossia painted pictures of sky and wood and garden for Igor. He listened, intent and grateful, but she could not escape the deepening consciousness that a rose-bush or ripening apples or a bed of pansies meant something remote to him, and she steeled herself to stay quiet. 'He has earned his right to weariness,' she kept reminding herself. A wireless set stood by the chair, the disturbing news rang in the room, but day by day Igor was travelling towards a place where black and menacing rumours could trouble him but little, not because he had grown small and self-centred, but because all those things were happening in time, and he was being drawn farther and farther from the limited concept.

One sultry, quiet morning she came into the room and saw him move his head towards the door, and she knew he was looking at her.

'Will you stay in bed?' she suggested, 'does your head ache? Would you like to see Vassia? Praskovia said he was free this week.' She spoke quietly, remembering how quickly he seized and interpreted the least intention in her voice.

'No,' he said, 'not Vassia, nor anyone else. My body is too tired today. But it is late, *golubushka*. I heard the clock strike,' he stroked her arm, 'and you have not got your coat on.'

'It is rest-day.'

'Ah yes, I should not have forgotten.'

In the little house Frossia was quiet and slow. In the street and the shops she hurried, and people responded to her urgency. She might have called on a neighbour, or laid her need before Miss Thompson or Lev Kirilich, or even telephoned to Praskovia. She did none of these things. Vassia could not help: there was nothing amiss with Igor's body, and weariness was beyond medical remedies. Nor were friends and neighbours necessary to her. She must have today and tomorrow to herself and him. She might ask the college for a week's leave of absence. 'There is little enough going on,' she thought, paying for a pound of shrimps at the co-operative, 'except for administrative work.'

She came back. Igor lay on the pillows. The thin bearded face seemed distant and listening to the sound which never fell on Frossia's own ears, but his fingers closed over hers.

'Shrimps,' she said, 'and strawberries.'

'Good . . .' he murmured, and lay still.

Later the small breeze of the morning fell low. Frossia opened wide all the windows and doors, and the smell of the garden invaded the house, the smell of the hot parched soil yearning for rain, but the inverted cup of the sky hung leaden-blue, and the heat was a pall lying over trees and roofs, smothering the cobble streets.

Frossia sat by the window. Through the door she could see the edge of the bed, the thin quiet hands sharply white against the dark green counterpane. He lay so quietly that she must needs stay silent though she was longing to tell him so many things. She snatched at some sewing and worked, and she was not thinking of the years they had shared. She forgot everything except the quiet in the little house because something was being born of that quiet, and she must not be found unready for its coming.

The sky changed from dark blue to angry purple, 'Blueberry kissel with not too much milk in it,' thought Frossia idly, her needle temporarily forgotten. It grew dark, but the world lay still, not a leaf stirred in the garden, and the flowers stood, faces downwards, defeated by the heat.

Presently Frossia saw one of the thin hands move up and down the shabby faded counterpane, and she went to him, and bent her face close. His breathing came evenly. 'How tired he looks,' Frossia remembered all the wrack and turmoil of his years, the struggle to master his letters, the struggle to work and get food, and the uncending urge to give and give to all who came near him, the years spent in dealing with harassed, hungry, dim-minded, amoral men and women who went to his tiny office at Warsaw Station, who saw in him a magician to get them coveted railway permits by the stroke of a wand, and all the nights spent in telling stories so as to ease the weariness of those who could not get back to their beds since the bridge was drawn up and their homes were on the other bank of the river. 'Arabian night—they called you,' she whispered very softly, 'and Arabian night you have been to so many people, always keeping their sense of wonder alive in them,' and for an instant he stirred, heard her whisper, and murmured back, 'The bridge is up, the bridge is up . . . I shall tell you about David Copperfield . . .'

'Yes, Igor, tell me about David Copperfield, or about the man who went to Jerusalem on foot,' she begged, her cheek pressed to his, but he never heard her.

Outside the vague purple of the sky grew darker and darker, and its menace heavier with every moment. The day's glare vanished in the sudden greyness. The wind rose vehemently, and the slamming of a door startled Frossia.

'Igor,' she rose, 'I am sorry. It is a storm coming, but you will feel cooler.'

He stirred. His fingers fumbled for hers, and his touch startled her far more than the fury of the wind. For an instant all quiet left her.

'Igor, but that is not possible . . . Igor,' she said again, refusing to see the beauty which was spreading over the thin tanned face, 'Igor.' She no longer could escape that beauty, and watched it merge with something like wonder, and the thin fingers were limp under her hand. 'Igor . . .' she cried, knowing that the slamming of doors would not disturb him. 'Yet you never told me. You did not speak.' She could not stem her thirst for a word however vaguely whispered, and anger swept over her: she should not have listened to him, she should have sent for Vassia, for someone. It need not have been necessary . . .

And she was Frossia again, bewildered, hurt, and rather frightened, and he, Igor Vladimirovich, who worked at Warsaw Station and preferred rye bread to saffron buns, and they were at Peterhof, flowering lilac above their heads, clusters of white lilac in her hands, and again she stood in a room so bleakly furnished and so beautiful, a room of a stern hard-working man who could somehow so interpret squalor that loveliness shone in it, and so speak of stress and turmoil that peace could be heard in his words. There was a book-littered table with an absurd pink-flannel rabbit for a pen-wiper, and that room, denied all creaturely comfort, was her home, and he, looking at her, was saying, 'But I am a hard man. I dare not . . .' and she answered, 'I have dared . . . I have dared to come home at last.' And now, clearer than before, she knew she had been at home all the years they had shared, and thinking of his own wide habitation, Frossia found herself back in Krasnopol, alone in the little house, with no one knocking at her door, nobody's voice to tell her that all was well with him.

Outside, sharp lashes of rain scourged the parched soil, beat down irises and sunflowers whose golden faces were pressed against the ground. The rain poured through the open windows, cascaded down the roof, and turned the tiny lawn into a squelching, glistening bog. Under the onslaught the earth lay battered and exhausted, but freed of earlier torment. Even the old apple-trees, their gnarled branches swaying wildly, looked laden with a blessing as well as with their unripened fruit.

The torrent ceased as violently as it had come. The purple shroud overhead was torn apart, and the bruised garden gleamed wet and gold and steel-blue. The broken flowers lay apparently desolate, but the world was washed clean, and wave upon wave came the fragrance of wet soil with its promise and its thanksgiving. Frossia stood in the doorway, her slippered feet in a deep puddle, water seeping through the thin leather. She crossed the threshold, stooped, and gathered a mass of broken flowers. Their wet earth-stained faces in her arms, she crept back into the room. The lark's voice was no intrusion on that stillness, and the miaowing of a neighbour's black cat, caught in the storm and now edging into the room, his fur a wet mess, reminded Frossia that there was milk in a jug on the table behind her. The cat drank greedily, and washed his whiskers. She put the wet flowers on the green counterpane when suddenly the glory of the day smote her and flung her back into the darkness. She could not struggle against it. She tottered out of the room. Wet black fur against her cheek, she cried . . .

Dasha came to the station early. In the huge glass-roof waiting-room a scraggy old man in a long brown overcoat, several mufflers round his neck, and a fur cap in his thin dirty hands, sat on a bench, saying loudly:

'I am a rook. I will caw to you if you like. But no, you all seem in such a hurry. The house is on fire. Hurry then, and come back tomorrow. I shall be a crow then, you know, crows gather on battlefields. Hurry, hurry,' he wailed in a thin pale voice.

Fascinated against her will, Dasha stared. Someone laughed. A few women stopped drinking tea and crossed themselves. The man with the fur cap in his hands leant back and crossed his legs.

'You don't believe I am a rook. But I can caw—' he began when two men in blue uniform came up to him.

'Yes, Klim Semyenych, we know that you are a rook. We have heard you caw. It was fine. But you must hurry. The train is waiting,' and he got up, smiled a wan apology, and shuffled away. One of the men stayed behind to explain:

'Taking them all to Detskoe. He is harmless enough, escaped from St Nicolas's Asylum back in 1917. A week ago he was a heron or a nuthatch. He always complains that someone keeps stealing his wings. A nice man, Klim Semenykh, shared his last crust in the famine. You need not worry, he would not hurt a fly.'

The women muttered:

'Well, all misery is blessed by God, *neschastnenki*, the unhappy one—'

Dasha ran out. It rained, and she shivered in her thin coat. They were going to Detskoe, their misery and darkness of mind blessed by God, the women had said. Abruptly she turned away because the whole world was mad, dead and dying and, certainly, unblessed by anyone. 'Was Nikolai right? Is it all just imagination? When we die, we end . . . Is that why I am so afraid of going near Frossia because she has done everything for me, and now she needs help, and I have none to give, and I could not even cry with her. It is foolish of me to be going at all . . .' But none the less she came to Kraspole, stared at the familiar green-timbered station, the ordinary street, the whole scene lavishly washed by the westering sun, and now that she was there, she could not hurry: she went down the wide oak-fringed Dubovaya as slowly as if weights were tied round her ankles.

And then she stopped.

She saw Frossia, a basket on one arm, a small blue hat on her greying hair. Frossia walked with her usual firm tread, head thrown back, face open to the sun.

'Frossia—' Dasha imagined she had screamed, but her voice came in a very sniall whisper.

'Goodness! *Dasha moyá*, Dashenka! I never expected you so soon. I meant to write properly. Do you mind walking back a little? We have no butter in the house.'

'Yes, of course,' Dasha said stupidly, 'of course, we must buy butter . . .'

They turned back. They bought butter, a little ham, some rolls, a box of matches, and candles. Dasha carried the basket. Frossia

talked about the storm, the new school in the park, a pupil of hers just back from France, a concert. Dasha listened, herself silent. She knew she was frightened by what she had not expected and could not understand. It was as if Frossia had wired to her 'All my china is broken, but I am getting some new cups, and you need not feel sorry for me.'

'What is the matter with her?' Dasha tried to plumb a depth and recoiled from the effort. 'She is sane. I am sane, but Igor died yesterday, and she looks as if she were walking in light. Yes, that is it—walking in light. But why? How can she? Butter and a concert . . .'

They were nearly at the gate when Frossia said:

'You may find Lev Kirillich there. He has been so helpful,' and feeling lost, Dasha went in. The big bare room seemed emptier than ever, and it froze her with its air of cold detachment. There, things once used were immediately put away, and Dasha, earlier worshipping Frossia's tidiness, now longed for a soiled plate, a tumbled creased cushion, some ash on the bare floor-boards. She knew she was a stranger there, achingly conscious of her turmoiled bewilderment, her untidy hair, a hole in her stocking, and, above all, her hands and her voice.

'Frossia,' she began, her hands trying to unwrap the butter. 'Frossia—'

Frossia was standing, her back to Dasha, and suddenly the firm line of her shoulders sagged and shook, and Dasha rushed forward.

'I am just stupid,' Frossia spoke almost angrily, 'I was with him at the time. And now I can go into that room and look at him because I know it is only his body, all else is safe and anchored, and then I see his watch or his pen, or just anything, and I feel lost, I get back to the earth, nothing but a body myself, and it is all humiliating and crippling. But it won't last, Dasha, he will never allow it to last—'

'Frossia, don't! His watch or his pen, they do matter, they are not merely of the earth, they make you come back, be yourself.'

... I don't know what I am saying, I just feel scared and sorry for you.'

'But you must not be. What I had of him I have still. Surely, you know that what you have of Gleb today will never be taken away from you.'

'Frossia, perhaps, I should not have come. You must not ... I can't understand you. Life is a warm room, and your words put ice into everything ...' Dasha's untidy speech ran fast like molten wax, once again she was gripped by her fear. 'Is Gleb all right? It is nearly four. He may be dining now. Or is he waiting for me? I should have telephoned before going,' and her broken embered voice went on, 'Frossia, you must not look at me in such a way. I know I am a weakling. I was nearly hammered out when *mamochka* died. One does feel the dreadful finality of it all. It is like a flower broken off the stem. It ought to be too much for anyone's acceptance. I can't even begin to understand you. What do you mean that he won't allow it to last?'

Frossia said:

'Perhaps it is just as well you should not understand. If you will wait a minute, I will get some tea,' and she thought, 'I wish I might tell her so much. I might tell her that Igor taught me that the most ordinary things in life could be at once difficult and easy, sometimes unbearable and always beautiful, that even grief and joy can walk together, and somehow have peace born of them. I wish I could tell her that I am living in him far more than I could express. But I must wait—'

At the end of that thorny day it was Dasha who went back to Leningrad in search of comfort.

'I can't understand,' she said to Gleb, 'Frossia walks as though a lit candle were being held over her head. It is beautiful, but I can't understand it. I had feared that I would go to Kraspole and not bring to her the comfort she needed, and I found out that she did not need any—'

'Imbecile intrusion!' said Gleb sharply, saw a shadow steal across Dasha's face, and softened his voice, 'Dear heart, we must give up

thinking in terms of just our own day. At such a time we must think either in terms of several coming generations or else in even vaster terms of eternity. I suppose Frossia has chosen the latter, and she is being coldly consistent, and her sense of logic repels you. Well, I often feel that salvation may come to the world by such people as Frossia, who somehow grind their own grief to dust because it is natural for them to think in universal terms, people, who refuse to mourn over a tombstone, whether they believe in immortality or not, simply because they will not sadden the outside world any deeper. There are people, who can go on giving when there is nothing left in them to give except charity, and that comes from without. You need not tell me that Frossia feels nothing at all. Of course, she will miss him, and her house is empty, but in the losing and the emptiness she sees something else. You may not see it, but it is childish to feel scared because she has given you no familiar response,' he put his arms over her shoulders, and, though he had not convinced her, she felt calmer.

She thought: 'There runs a thread between all our differences, his and mine, joining them together, and that thread has the virtue and texture of both.'

Praskovia, for once wrenching herself free of lectures, pupils, and committees, went down to Kraspole, came back, and disconcerted Dasha still further.

'Understand her? Yes, from her point of view, not mine. I would plunge into the Neva if Vassia died. But then I don't believe in anything, and she does. Why grudge her that logic, Dasha?' She looked at Dasha obliquely and pulled at the belt of her new crimson dress. 'Listen, she more or less entrusted you to us, and we never see you. Vassia likes you because he says he is as mad as you are. Your work is good,' suddenly, clumsily she kissed Dasha. 'I have seen almost nothing of you since that odious fringe of a girl vanished, and yet our friendship has grown. It is odd and comforting. Come to a meal,' she urged, 'I might offer you a salad of bootlaces and blotting paper, but you won't mind, will you?'

Dasha promised, but the very afternoon she was to go there, she came back from the academy to find the table strewn with sheets of manuscript. She began reading, and the immediate world vanished for her. It was a poem of Gleb's, the legend of a Persian princess who lived imprisoned in a tower. By her own magic she would turn into a raven, fly over the steppes, and bring darkness and fear into people's hearts. Stenka Rasin, the great cossack ataman, heard about her. One day he rode to the tower, looked through the window, and saw the princess asleep under the cover of embroidered rose gauze. Rasin never knew that her soul was out of her body and far away, sweeping over the steppes. He called a priest, who sprinkled holy water over the princess, and she never awoke. Later her soul tried to come back, but it found no lodgment in the body sprinkled by holy water. It happened long ago, but the soul went on its aimless flying. Never again could it be reunited to the body, and the soul went on weeping, flinging itself against the stone walls of the tower, and those, whose consciences tormented them, could hear the wailing of the disinherited soul. They remembered their own dark peril, and made peace with their Creator, but such peace became theirs only by the anguish of another's desolate soul.

Dasha put the sheets down. She dimly remembered having once heard of the legend, but here it was built in strong, abrupt lines, no concession made to rhythm or form. Gleb's handling of the old theme was like the thick strong walls of the tower, broken here and there by irregular embrasures. Its very imagery was so chiselled that the sculptor in Dasha caught the quality, so cold, superb, and yet charged with the burden of a hot summer day in the steppes when even the tall yellow-green grass seemed too weary to wave. Dasha cried, her face in her hands, a little girl crying for the pride in her. Whenever she heard Gleb lecture, she felt small and proud, and always near to tears. Always she saw him as he had been in his childhood, and saw him but dimly. His nightmare whispers had not quite revealed everything: the scar on the right hand still pointed at a door closed to her. But now, pride came uppermost,

and the manuscript on the table suggested that she might try and have the day marked by a fitting gesture.

She looked into the cupboard, yet a bottle of beer, some cheese, and very stale *bublik* gave but slender promise of a festive evening. Gleb liked sweets. A woman in Libknecht Prospect sold walnuts boiled in sugar. Dasha frowned at her shabby black purse. The walnuts were expensive, and she needed a pair of gloves for the winter. Yet she disliked struggling with petty economics. Gleb must have his gold-brown walnuts that evening.

She hurried out, but the day was tenanted by strange ghosts forcing a different pattern on her. From a possibly inedible salad in Praskovia's company Dasha was flung into the heart of an ancient legend, and from sugared walnuts to a funeral. It was very humble and ordinary, the unpainted hearse drawn slowly by a hungry shaggy horse, the open coffin casually covered with some thin yellow stuff. There were but three family mourners, two wizened old women, their heads in customary white kerchiefs, and a bent-shouldered old man in a blue velvet cap. A middle-aged body in shabby brown was walking by the side of the coffin. She held herself so importantly that Dasha guessed her to be an outsider. Whenever the wind tossed aside the yellow coverlet, the woman moved nearer, rearranged the shabby folds, and stepped back, her thin mottled face satisfied. The mourners took no notice of her. The man, who led the horse, kept his grey cap on and observed the traffic.

The Persian princess and the walnuts were forgotten. Dasha followed the funeral, herself unaware why she was so attracted by a very common detail of daily life in the city. Funerals so often crossed the island making for the Smolensky Cemetery at the end of the Sixteenth Line. Idle urchins and children just released from school and stray dogs sometimes accompanied those pathetic processions. Militiamen stopped the traffic and decorously saluted the coffins left open according to old usage. Otherwise scant notice was taken of them, and few really important processions ever found their way to Smolenskoe. They were mostly humble hearses, no

canopies to them, drawn by a single horse, led by an indifferent slovenly driver. Yet Dasha followed, watching the thin woman's chapped red hands busy over the recalcitrant yellow coverlet, and she went on until the procession came to the lichen-covered gates of Smolenskoe. Then the thin woman hung back and whispered to her:

'It is a beautiful cover, real old brocade. So I had to come, it is such a windy day, you can't expect people who are busy with their grief, to keep their eyes on a coverlet however expensive it is,' she added proudly, 'it has already been lent thirty-eight times. Think of it!'

'How very kind of you,' Dasha murmured, and the owner of the coverlet threw her a slightly contemptuous glance, and hurried on. Dasha watched the small procession pass through, the richly burnished foliage of beech and ash putting to shame the faded yellow stuff over the coffin and the drab clothes of the mourners.

Then she turned back, the walnuts again in her thought, when, without any warning, came a downpour, and she must needs seek sanctuary in the porter's lodge. It was dim there, she could smell rye bread, blackbeetles, tobacco, and long undisturbed dust. Out of the room's dark well came the porter, dusty and shapeless in a voluminous blue coat, a scarlet cord round his waist. She liked the cord and the bearded red face. He motioned her to a bench.

'Sit,' his voice had a soothing depth in it, 'what came quickly, goes quickly. Weather is like money, *milochka*.'

'How many people,' she gestured towards the path, 'do you get every day?'

'People? We get no people here.'

She peered at him, he looked ordinary, well-fleshed, earthy.

'Flesh and bones are not people, *milochka*. Stands to reason things must be done decently, but they are not people who come here.'

'Well, the dead then,' she spoke impatiently.

'Call them that, *pokoiniki*, "those at rest", little harm in words,' he poked a thick dirty finger at a wooden platter, 'that is dead too. I reckon the tree lived once, and somewhere the tree may still be

living, but my platter is dead enough. Ever felled a tree?' he asked, and would not wait for an answer. 'As a lad, I worked with my *batka*, down Kostroma way, huge old forests there used to be. Trees must be felled, and a dead tree does not matter, but you bring your axe to a tree with sap in it, and you feel like a hang-man . . .'

'Grandfather,' laughed Dasha, 'a tree is not a living person.'

'By the same token, flesh and bones are not people,' he puffed at his cigarette, and acrid smoke spiralled in the dim and airless room. Dasha coughed, but the fierce rain hammering at the tiny window made her stay.

'Take me here, my bones are old enough, and it is a hard bitter life, and I am too set to learn new ways. So they left me here. "Grandfather," they said, "you could not work at your age. You stay here." Well, the dead don't bother them, it is the living they are so deep in, and I am not concerned with the dead either, but if I told them why, they would spit and laugh at me. I daresay I am a fool. When you are old, *milochka*, quiet comes upon you, and that quiet is just like a place, say, a well-warmed room for you to live through the winter, you don't somehow know much about it, but you are there,' he spat out a wisp of greyish-yellow tobacco and picked at his one remaining tooth. 'I reckon children know of it, and the old also. In the middle of life people forget. But that quiet is good, it is not upon your bones, they ache far too much, it is elsewhere, and I am not telling you a story, *milochka*, I am too near the damp earth myself to lie much, and by that token no people come here. That quiet has got them, I reckon, and you would not find it in a cemetery. Have an apple?' he invited, but Dasha shook her head.

The rain eased off. She thanked her host, made her way back and bought the walnuts.

2

'Today,' said Gleb, 'you are wearing a different face. That is tiresome. You are as lovable as ever, but you seem a stranger, and I have no time for strangers. There is a lecture to prepare, and my trousers to mend, and I must launder a shirt before I go to college tonight.'

'I can mend your trousers later. Here are two safety pins, and I will wash your shirt at once, and if you are so busy, why waste time talking nonsense?'

He caught her and held her.

'Because you can't deceive me. We are both so busy that we just tumble asleep in the evenings, little said between us. And so often I am rude and tell you to be silent because I don't want to waste time listening, yet you know that we don't need words to build bridges between us. And yours is a different face today. Did you walk along that little stream in the morning, and watch the wet gold-brown leaves float with the current, and weave a spell in your mind? Or did you wash your eyes in a well with a cross upon the lid? Or are you merely walking about, an idea bigger than your mind pressing on you?' he let her go and laughed. 'All of it is intriguing and tiresome—because I must work.'

'And I must wash your shirt,' she seized it, rummaged for a piece of blue-mottled soap, and went down the wide stairs to the brick-vaulted basement the tenants used as laundry. It was empty, warm, and dim. 'But I don't want much light,' thought Dasha, turning a tap over the chipped enamelled basin. 'So I am wearing a different face. He can interpret without any clues . . .'

She had never told Gleb about the old porter of the blue coat and the scarlet cord. She even kept to herself the feeling of rapture over the Persian princess, explaining the purchase of the walnuts as an instant's whim. But she knew that she was being led down a path she had not walked before. She thought of people she knew intimately, and was conscious of a certain re-shaping in her judgments as if the softer, kindlier light, in which she now walked were

falling on them also, and the harsher details became gentle, and the dimmer corners grew light. Old Barina, poor Valia, now cared for in a home far away in the south, even Tania, exiled to the north for a fantastic mistake sprung from thin cotton vanity, Igor going as quietly as the tide in some safely sheltered bay, and Trofim who, in the heart of a storm, may have heard his God's voice in his own heart and, hearing, answered it aright. There were others . . . Praskovia, who shrugged her ungainly shoulders at an ikon, and had a child's unwavering faith in the innate goodness of mankind and a saint's zeal for the truth in her own work; Kirill, who wasted hours on inconsequential drollery, regarded life in terms of textbooks and bottles of beer, and yet understood things left unspoken. Olga Petrovna, with her pathetic crimson parrot and her passion for giving—be it a stale crust or a travelling cinema. And behind that crowded stage Dasha now saw another, just as familiar faces, girls of her own year at the Academy, untidy, noisy, brusque and moody, and mocking, were, girls, who mislaid their chisels and missed lectures and cursed at committees, and swore at excursions, canteen work, frequent break-downs in the drainage system, bad light in the studios, and occasional shortage of material, but 'they all live' thought Dasha, wringing out the sodden mass of blue-checked calico, 'Lord God, they are alive! We all are. And somewhere there must hide a link between all our livingness and what Frossia sees, and what I can't yet understand.'

The day before she had gone to watch the first year girls engage in a hockey match against the workers of a textile factory near Schlüsselburg. The match was held in Petrovsky Park, and back they tramped all the way to Vassily Island where the Academy students entertained their guests to an improvised meal in the canteen. There were beer, tea, *vatrushki*, sausage sandwiches, and even sunflower seeds piled into tiny red and gold-lacquered wooden bowls. The factory girls, in their brief red skirts and little blue shirts open at the throat, brought a wave of colour into the sombre ochre-walled place. Some among them looked weedy, others none

too clean, a few spoke sullenly, but they had enjoyed their game, and stared, silent but interested, at some Leningrad etchings. Dasha, having poured out the tea and pushed the trays of food along her table, sat by a well-fleshed freckled girl whose plate was piled high with *vatrushki*, cake, gingerbread, and sausage. The girl chewed briskly, food held in both hands.

'Have some more?' Dasha glanced at the emptied plate.

'I can't eat any more,' said the girl and wiped her large mouth with the back of a square hand, 'but you might show me the way to the lavatory.'

Dasha got up. On their way upstairs the girl stopped suddenly.

'Have you a library here?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Perhaps they might lend me "Crime and Punishment." We have a good library, but I have been waiting for months, and it is always out.'

'Why yes, I suppose so.'

'I must have it now. It is for a Dostoevsky debate. They have asked me to open it, see.' She tossed back her close-cropped fair head, 'I have read "Crime and Punishment" five times, but I don't know enough.'

'You shall have it,' promised Dasha, ran to interview the librarian, and brought the book. The girl took it and bowed solemnly.

'I am Marfa Chukina. They know me well at the factory. I am honest. You shall have it back.'

'Marfa Chukina,' Dasha rinsed the basin, turned off the light, and hurried up the dim stairs, shivering a little because the wet shirt lay so cold across her arm, 'Marfa Chukina should not be handling a machine loom. She might be out with Olga Petrovna. She never will be. Yet, surely, her debates are not wasted.'

'Here is the shirt,' she cried, 'but the radiators are cold, it will never be dry tonight.'

'Well, I can go with my coat buttoned up.' Gleb never raised his head. 'Please keep quiet. I have less than an hour.'

'It is rest-day.'

'Well, the lecture is not for the students. It is for the women from the Gutuevsky: I promised it them weeks ago. Damn them, but they can't come on any other evening.'

'I shall come.'

'Be quiet,' he said in a remote voice, and Dasha turned to her mending basket.

It was the same severe bleak hall where she had gone so long ago, fear and pride lodged in her heart. Now the fear had gone, and her pride moved in much quieter waters. As once before, she chose a bench by the door, and watched the hall being filled with men in shabby caps and mostly kerchiefed women, husbands and brothers and sisters of Marfa Chukina, who came in, looked about, a faint note of challenge in their faces, and sat down noisily, and talked in unsubdued voices, and some spat, and nearly all chewed sunflower seeds and cracked nuts. But when Gleb came, talking, fidgeting, sunflower seeds, and nuts ceased to be. He started abruptly.

'You want to know about our proletarian novelists. All right. I shall tell you, and please keep all your questioning to the end. Take Pomyalovsky who died in 1863 at twenty-eight, just a poor deacon's son in one of our suburbs here. He got a smattering of education at a clerical seminary, you know what a *boursse* stood for—gloomiest surroundings, brutal treatment, hardly any food for either mind or body. Later he had to struggle for bare livelihood, circumstance battered him, and he died of drink. His whole work was crowded into the last three years of his life.'

He went on, sketching the writer's work and that of others, Reshetnikov, Levitov, and Sleptzov. Dasha, listening, knew that those were no more names to Gleb. He spoke of them in such a manner because he had lived in them and through them. Against that proudly sombre background he moved, following now one mind, now another, and at the back of it all, several drifts caught into one, flowed the clear waters of the country's mind, now reflecting the sudden brief laughter of April skies, now the soberness of a November theme, rippling to light winds, and swelling, white-flounced, under storms, now glazed with the cold silver

sheen of moonlight, now burnished with the generous sun of a hot northern summer.

'I am at home here,' thought Dasha, listening and jaying in the rugged tanned faces turned towards Gleb's desk, 'I shall never read any of those books. I seem to have read them already,' and she no longer listened. Her questing mind leapt away from the hall, wandered from a rye field to the glittering pageant of a big military review, from a factory to an airless crowded train. Even back to the Golden Cockerel, the orange-painted walls, the smell of wood shavings, varnish, paint and honey, and all the scenes seemed new and old at once, wholly her own. The bench in the hall was hers, and the dirty crumpled handkerchief in her neighbour's calloused hands was also hers, and the small green lamp on Gleb's desk. She seized upon the idea, her mind's probing fingers caressing its warm quality.

'I would be arrested if I walked away with the bench or the lamp. And I don't want to walk away with either of them. They are just mine—away from all possession.'

It was over, there were few questions, but a long spell of such applause that Dasha all but held fingers to her ears, and then the hall was empty, and Dasha ran to the desk, and saw the weariness in his face.

'I can't come just now. I must see a man at the chancery. What is it?'

'I loved it. Never mind the chancery. And you forgot, it is rest-day—it would be closed. I must tell you,' she hurried, afraid that her thought would never be clothed into words unless she made haste, 'it made me feel as if everything were my own, benches and lamps, all in Russia, even a rye field somewhere near Podolsk where I have never been.' She laughed, glad to see the weariness creep away from his face.

'So you have understood what I can't always grasp,' he spoke with the air of one who, having imagined a thistle in his hands, found it to be a rose.

'I don't understand,' she said quickly and humbly, 'it may be nonsense. I just grope towards things.'

Gleb flung down his papers, some of them fluttered to the floor, and neither noticed.

'I knew you wore a different face,' he said at last, and Dasha did not contradict him. She stooped, snatched a blank sheet of paper, begged him for a pencil, and wrote furiously.

'What?'

'I have just remembered—a note to Frossia—about a window. Have you a stamp?'

The thin bespectacled girl ran in, her arms waving wildly, her face absurdly smeared with vivid blue paint.

'Daria Petrovna, ah, Daria Petrovna, the Uzbek delegates are here, and I can't find Professor Samaev, and they are having a fight in Studio No. 8. Alacva says someone has stolen her box of crayons, and I know nothing of it, but there is nobody to see the delegates, and it is dreadful, and the stove in the reception hall has not been stoked since yesterday, and Marvei says the wood allowance has not come. And what is one to do with the Uzbek comrades?'

'See them,' and Dasha added abruptly, 'Danilova, you might wash that blue paint off. You will find Professor Samaev in the chancery.' She rose from her bench and struggled out of the dirty green overall.

She longed to work, and it was her fourth interruption that morning. She was chairman of the maintenance committee, and had had to deal with a burst pipe. Then someone had run in with a complaint about the lack of green clay in Studio No. 4 and, finally, Dasha had to wrestle with the awkward matter of a caricature charcoaled on the main staircase. The caricature was decidedly indelicate, the likeness was established at once, and the unpopular master of art-history had gone on shouting about a plenary committee until Dasha all but flung a lump of wet clay at his head. Yet somehow the burst pipe, green clay, and the caricature were dealt with. The light was none too good, but Dasha had hoped for a quiet ending to a turmoiled morning. She was longing to lose

herself in the modelling of a boy's face. But now the Uzbeks were there.

'See them,' she had said briefly and wearily, but as soon as she saw them, she was glad of them. They stood in the dim hall, five small, faultlessly shaped girls, golden skin and ebony hair set off by their flowing clothes of striped silk, magenta, green, silver and crimson, and in her pleasure at seeing them Dasha forgot all the thorns and nettles of her broken morning. The Uzbek delegates were childlike in their curiosity expressed by gesture and glance rather than speech. Their Russian was limited and all the more enchanting. They moved from hall to hall, from studio to studio, with something of true Hellenic grace in their walk. The etching school drew them, and Dasha sensed the contrast they experienced: the cold precise northern etchings were so far removed from their own rugged and wild handling of any theme. One of them said carefully, pointing at a small etching of a bridge: 'It is a pitcher of icy water from the mountains, clear and so good, yes?'

The delegates were invited to the reception hall where tea and speeches awaited them, but Dasha escaped to the studio. There she looked at her work: the boy's head was barely begun, she meant to have Gleb for her model, Gleb as a boy with the wonder all but stamped out of his face and yet still there because of some distant promise. Yet Dasha sat idly, and the light went dim. Her hands stayed folded.

She realised once again the beauty of stress behind Gleb's work. She remembered him saying once: 'Well, they brought me back to life again to do something. I am the thinnest of all thin slices in the country's loaf, still I am a slice, or a crumb, maybe . . . but even crumbs might be of use in the end.'

Down below in the panelled hall hung a huge relief map, done in grey clay, everything new on it brushed with deep scarlet, cities, ports, fuelling stations along the Arctic, immense factory towns in the south and in Siberia, new ventures started far, far away in sunlit lands which bred women like those Uzbek girls. Dasha stared out of the window, and her mind's eye rested on that somewhat

startling map. A thread ran round about those numberless scarlet daubs, and to that thread were joined the bench and the green-shaped lamp as though the ownness she had sensed in an instant's flash were a whole life's experience.

'There is wholeness somewhere. Kirill may grumble about the return to the classics and ties and stiff collars, and sometimes false notes do ring all too loudly, but Kirill has never understood the way Gleb does, as I am trying to . . . that the old and the new can be merged, that apex and plinth can share some common quality—ascending and descending, the line between them bringing apex to plinth, and plinth to apex. Sometimes it is a clear May morning with that line, and sometimes a November night, but the line is always there, and the day will come when I shall see it—as Gleb does . . .'

3

Frossia loved the brief untidy scrawl Dasha had written in the empty lecture hall. 'I believe I know where you are. I may never get there. My hands are too greedy to touch and to hold, but it is like seeing sunlight—just to know a little about it.' Frossia understood it, but she sent no reply. She was hedged in by numberless pedestrian tasks, for she meant to return to Leningrad, and the little house among the apple-trees occupied much of her scant leisure, and now she had Miss Thompson to think about.

The great review in Leningrad had aged Miss Thompson and made her remember the turmoil and lovely past. She went back to Kraspole, spent in body and frayed in mind. The weariness left her soon enough, but the scene, offered by Kraspole, seemed dwarfed and shallow to her. Uneventful and peaceful mornings spent with Lev Kirillich came to mean less and less. Miss Thompson disliked herself for such an attitude, but it clung to her like glue spread over the fingers. Work irked her. Brushes slipped out of her hands. She upset little bottles of paint, grumbled at her own

clumsiness, and blamed Lev Kirillich. The day she handed him a doll, her face painted a bright green, he said awkwardly:

'Lena, ah Lena, is it that your bones are aching?'

'Never mind my bones!' his shy smile ground to dust her bad temper. 'I want a change, Levushka, I am sullen and useless, and a fool. I should have died at Tzaritzin twenty years ago. It is dreadful to age in Russia. Russia is too young, and I may be young enough in my mind, but my body is spent, and that troubles me day and night. I snap at people. I have no words for the neighbours. I swore at an errand boy yesterday. I am getting old.'

'Nobody thinks you are.'

She did not answer. She sat there in full sunlight, her small blue-veined hands folded over the impossible doll. Lev Kirillich noticed the crumpled collar of her grey shirt, the stray wisps of hair under the broad brim of her yellow gardening hat. 'She is like a house in need of repair,' he thought sadly, said nothing, offered her tea, and quietly hid away the distressingly painted doll, but later he carried his trouble to Frossia.

'Euphrosynia Pavlovna, I am a clumsy old man. It looks dim to me. A self has gone out of her, and something else has come in, and I can't see what it is. I have known her angry, I have known her sad,' he confessed, shaking his huge head, 'but she has never stood still. And now she is in a place like a bog; feet and mind all still, and yet she is restless, Euphrosynia Pavlovna.'

So Frossia forsook the cupboards and chests with their unsorted belongings, and often had Miss Thompson to come and see her and share sketchy meals, and Miss Thompson sat in the room where Igor's empty chair remained in its place by the window, and Frossia knew Lev Kirillich had been right: she was both still and restless, and nobody could reach her. She sat, her small hands propping the sharp bony chin, and she took pleasure in speaking to Frossia in her mother-tongue, but she always talked about distant, impersonal matters, and her shoes stayed unpolished, and her hair untidy, and people in the street would stop and nudge one another

and whisper: 'Why, what has happened to the Englishwoman?' and others replied: 'Well, everybody must get old sooner or later,' and Frossia felt she could do nothing at all. There were neat little almshouses in Kraspole where old women wore brown-checked gingham dresses and drank numberless glasses of tea on a roofed verandah, and were deeply unhappy because of the unliving neatness in the small bright rooms all furnished according to a set pattern. Miss Thompson once said to Frossia:

'It would be kinder to let them go all untidy.'

And Frossia read her unspoken fear.

'Shall we write to Olga Petrovna?' she suggested to Lev Kirillich. 'After all, Miss Thompson might teach English.'

He looked doubtful, but the very next day Miss Thompson came to Frossia, her collar freshly ironed, hair tidy, gloves immaculate and shoes but recently polished. Her arms were laden with parcels. She spoke briskly:

'I am going to Riazan tomorrow. I am going to teach English at an elementary school. I wrote a long time ago, and they would not answer,' she sniffed and added, 'I have bought thick stockings and several overalls. Ink always stains one's clothes.'

'Riazan?' echoed Frossia, 'but it is so far.'

'Yes,' nodded Miss Thompson, 'a nice long train journey and strangers at the end of it, and nobody to tell you how changed you look. It is better so,' she looked out of the window, 'your fruit will be good this autumn. You should pickle the apples. I don't much care for apple-jam myself. It has been good having you, good being at Kraspole. That child you love will go far, and so much has happened since. But a chapter is ended,' she spoke angrily, emphatically, 'chapters are not letters—you can't add postscripts to them.'

She could not stay, she said. Frossia watched her disappear in the twilight. She walked fast, and one of her bundles slipped from under her arm, and a gaily painted overall fluttered and fell, a banner of farewell. The next morning she was gone, unnoticed by anyone, gone on the long train journey to meet strangers at the end of it, and that day Frossia had no leisure at all. She did not know Lev Kirillich

very intimately, there was little she could say for fear of invading his secret corners by an incautious look or glance. She stayed, tidied the huge bare room for him, cooked some gruel and potatoes, made tea, and admired his handiwork. Lev Kirillich accepted it all. When the afternoon was dying, and the sky looked dim violet in the west, and the blue walls went dully dark, and the breath of late honeysuckle drifted in on the rising wind, he said lamely:

'She will never come back. Twenty-three years have I known her, Euphrosynia Pavlovna, and always did I know that she would go in such a way when weariness came to her. She is made in a very peculiar way,' and Frossia realised he was speaking of a Miss Thompson whom Kraspole had never met. 'Steel and velvet together, and though the velvet may have gone threadbare, her steel never came to rust.'

4

Her stumpy hands rummaging in a half-filled trunk, Praskovia said:

'I suppose Dasha will come today. She may forget, of course. The day I got the salmon and the pineapple, she did forget, and her excuse was a stranger's funeral. Today she might fall back on a bear's wedding. Well, if she does forget, I must go and say goodbye. Vassia,' she raised her unkempt head, 'there is no room here for your microscope. You will have to pack it yourself. Oh Vassia, I know you are on holiday and terribly preoccupied, but, please, answer me—'

Vassia did not answer. He stopped cleaning his teeth and wandered off to the window. 'Really, the Neva is just like any other river in the world,' he said loudly and stubbornly because he did not really believe it, but he had to say it to himself just as in his boyhood he would say: 'They have put out the light, but the candle is still there, and the light came from the candle, and I must not be foolish,' and, having said it, he would go on hugging his fears of dark corners.

Praskovia began folding a green dressing-gown. The stuff was some slippery silk, the garment kept falling on the floor, and she broke in impatiently:

'I have said nothing about the Neva. But Odessa is not Kazan,' she knew he had not liked Kazan: it smelt of soap and Tartars too much, he said, and the library kept offering him Flaubert and Dostocvsky when he longed for good detective novels. 'You must shave, Vassia. Stop staring out of the window. And Odessa is a very attractive place.'

'*Chort ëë voznil!*' swore Vassia and swore again. 'Yes, may the devil take it!' He turned away from the window and began looking for his razors. He found them on the sofa, sandwiched between an empty thermos flask and some yellowed copies of 'Pravda'. 'No, my little light, *svetik moy*, Odessa is not Kazan, no more than a razor is a piece of mutton, but you were not born here, Leningrad is just a city to you, streets, bridges, houses, and no more. It is wine and magic to me, but you would not understand.' Vassia, razors in hand, remembered that he was on holiday, and free to behave in any way he pleased. He could cry, no sense of undone or delayed duty hampering him. He dropped the razor on the dusty floor, sat down, and cried.

Praskovia flung the unfolded dressing-gown into the trunk.

'I wish they would telephone and say that Bradov had heart failure in the night. Then you would have a few nice operations to play with. Come on, Vassia. Think of Odessa and the sea. Why, we could easily have our holiday in the Caucasus, and you love the mountains.' Softened all at once, Praskovia spoke to a small and bewildered boy lost in the dark.

'Mountains,' he wiped his eyes, 'but we have no friends in Odessa.'

'Friendship has nothing to do with geography.' Praskovia snatched at a transparent primrose nightgown and waved it like a banner. 'And friendship never depends on distances and meetings. Otherwise, all our friends would be as useful as last year's snow. We are all too busy to sit on one another's knees. Once Dasha said: "I

have known Dr. Gukin for nearly five years, he may have looked at me five times, but I doubt it, yet I know him so well, and he knows me." We have never had nice stretchy hours for friends,' sighed Praskovia. 'Only your colleagues would swarm here and discuss brains. Oh,' spoke the peasant girl from Ufa, 'if I were not devoted to you, I might have been tempted to see your brains many a time. But what does it matter?' she caught his blue eyes straying towards the window, an unhappy boy's eyes, and she knew she must again be gentle. 'Come, Vassia, the day won't be young for ever, and when our friends come they might start looking for a coffin. Now then—face facts, we are leaving tonight, we are both happy, we are going to important jobs, and manufactured misery is about as useful as the saddle on a cow.'

Vassia sighed, shaved, and recited in a deep sad voice: 'I love thee, creation of Peter,' and found he could not remember the next line. He looked for Pushkin and saw the emptied book shelves. He shrugged and packed until the words danced in his mind, and he sang lustily, a man released from all burden:

'I love thy severe and wonderful appearance,
The peaceful flow of the Neva,
And the granite of her banks.'

Praskovia frowned, checked brusque comment, and went on packing.

She was well used to it, and her ideas were governed by a simple enough principle: whatever was tumbled into a trunk was certain to tumble out again at the end of a journey, and the least hint of method in the process was superfluous. She stuffed bedlinen, crockery, her own multi-coloured clothes, pillows and cushions, books and papers, throwing them in wherever she saw room, and she had packed two trunks and three suitcases in the time it took Vassia to decide that the microscope could not possibly be packed in his portmanteau.

'Put it into the bast hamper. Or else carry it as it is. Then you could nurse it in the train and be happy.'

'No . . . No!' he muttered.

The room looked like an old refugee woman left stranded at some wayside station, all her belongings gone. Age lay upon the room and helplessness breathed from the walls. It had had its use, and was now being abandoned. Rugs and curtains had gone, the curved book shelves suggested toothless gums. Of furniture there was none except the table and the sofa crowded with scraps of paper, string, and cardboard boxes. The sofa was nailed to the wall, and guests would have to sit on trunks pushed to the table. But Praskovia, having strewn the table with caviare in a gay pink pot, a bulky Polish ham and some chocolates, looked pleased.

'I spent a fortune at the Gastronom yesterday,' she cried, and looked for a jug to give a home to the bunch of flame-coloured dahlias, but all the jugs were packed, and she decided that an empty milk bottle would answer her purpose. 'Yes, a fortune, Vassia, but this is not the usual starched party—it is a gesture of love, and one must not count one's silver. Where is the gin? Oh dear, only two plates left, and we shall be six. Vassia, you must unpack some china. No, the plates will do. You had better find a knife. Here is the bell,' she stumbled over an opened basket in the dim ante-room and laughed: 'Frossia, be careful where you go. The Neva is flowing all over the flat. At least, it was five minutes ago.'

But the Neva had ceased to flow. Vassia stood grave and dignified, and waved a large horn paper-knife over the ham.

'Vassia,' Praskovia wrenched the knife away and sat on the nearest trunk. 'Frossia, he does not begin his work for a fortnight. Have pity on me—fourteen days and nights in the company of a man who can't tell a ham from a book.'

'Well, never mind,' he smiled at Frossia, and then his face looked seamed and sad like a sheet of badly crumpled paper, 'you see, she was not born here. When I have leisure to look at Lenin-grad, my eyes swim, my heart aches delightfully. But she laughs at me. This morning she said "Vassia, you must shave." I could shave anywhere—even in a gutter of Kazan. I could not look at

the Neva anywhere except here. Does she understand my hunger? No. Does she allow that autumn in Leningrad makes you feel all warmly miserable because of its beauty that clutches your very heart and does not let you go until you have cried your eyes out? No. She merely tells me there is sea at Odessa . . . ' He smiled and kissed his hand to Praskovia.

Frossia smiled back. The dishevelled room, so faithfully mirroring its impossible and lovable mistress, the table with its opulent food, old blue plates, and tumblers, the bunch of rather faded dahlias in their milk bottle, the hurriedly strapped luggage, the whole scene produced an incongruous impression of warmth and happy gestures and a harmony the mere exterior could never have suggested. Frossia wished she might laugh and cry also.

'The warm misery of autumn,' said Vassia. 'Well, I don't know. All seasons are movements, all are warm, here in Leningrad they make one ache somehow. Dasha knows it, I think. Spring and autumn are an involved dance—in them old winter and young summer join hands in the never varying and never monotonous interlude of living, dying, and then living again. And I have known it so much more clearly since Igor went,' she thought, sitting down on a trunk and accepting a plate of clumsily hacked ham. 'Does Dasha see it?'

And then she remembered Dasha's last letter. 'She may—' and Frossia checked herself hurriedly, for they were all there, Dasha and Gleb and Olga Petrovna, and another trunk was pushed near the table, and they all knew they had many intimate things to say to one another, and kept them unsaid. The party was a gesture of love. And there was some defiance in it. It should have been held to mark an uprooting, but there seemed none to mark. The hastily strapped luggage had been to Moscow and Kazan and Kharkov. It had journeyed to Leningrad. Now it would go into the heart of the south, and the trunks and the suitcases, like their owners and also like the guests, belonged to Moscow and Kazan and places farther East, to Leningrad as well as to Odessa. So Dasha thought, eating the ham with her fingers and sharing Gleb's tumbler. 'We all move

about so much that roots have become almost alien. Yet we are rooted in our work, in the country,' and she heard Olga Petrovna say almost fussily:

'What a silly thing to say! Why should I be uncomfortable sitting on a trunk? Nobody can travel far on comfort. I believe that we, as a nation, were born to be uncomfortable, and we somehow hug discomfort. Stupid, maybe, but I like it.' She bit into a chocolate, chewed it pensively, and turned to her ham again. 'And we survive. Bear's hide for skin, perhaps. Why, in Archangel I saw women dockers sleep on straw in the open, and under the rain sometimes. They don't go to pieces. Praskovia,' she shouted suddenly, 'if you buy flowers you must give them water,' almost in sorrow she stretched a hand to stroke the tired face of a great flaming dahlia, and her wide blue sleeve brushed against a tall wooden salt cellar, and upset it. Her face went ashen.

'Oh dear—I should not have done it at any table but my own,' she whispered, but nobody noticed it except Vassia who scooped up the salt with the paper knife.

They talked about the new appointment in Odessa, and Gleb's recent success at the academy of sciences where he had read a paper on Lomonosov, and the appalling shortage of rubber, and the new forest school at Kraspole, and always about the thunder of war just newly broken in the west, and Gleb said almost nonchalantly, 'Well, so long as we are left in peace—there is so much for us to do,' and Praskovia remembered a journalist telling her that the business would be over by Christmas, and Dasha, curled up on the trunk, thought 'And it is all so remote. Out in the west. No, it need not concern us at all . . .'

The *dvornik* poked his shaggy head through the door. The car, sent by the Health Commissariat, was by the yard gate. He accepted a small glass of gin, hoisted a trunk on his back, and shuffled out.

'*Seychas*, citizens, I shall be back at once—'

'*Seychas*,' laughed Praskovia, 'well, the luggage will take some time. I have my slippers to pack and the plates. Where are Vassia's razors?' She went into the ante-room and began packing the

tumblers into a bast hamper. Vassia lost his gloves, the goloshes he had on did not belong to him, he said, and he kept straying to the windows, but nobody minded his misery, it was so natural, he was born in Leningrad, he kept telling them. Frossia stacked the hurriedly dried plates together, and Praskovia urged them all to finish the chocolates. 'If I can find my little red cap, we are ready,' she said when Olga Petrovna suddenly seized her by the shoulders, and ordered them all into the living-room where the table was bare except for the faded dahlias. The luggage had gone. Olga Petrovna closed the door, her shrivelled face severe.

'We can all sit on the floor. Never mind the dust. Keep quiet for a minute or two. The chauffeur can wait. An old custom is worth more than a cucumber—'

All of them sprawled on the floor as if it were the most natural thing for them to do. Their fathers had done it before attempting a journey, and they, unaccustomed to ancient use though they were, could yet see in it something inalienably their own. So they sat quietly until Olga Petrovna scrambled to her feet, and Vassia murmured 'Well, really,' but Gleb silenced him with a gesture, and Olga Petrovna turned to the window where the arrowy reach of the opposite bank was burning roseate-red in the light from the west, and she prayed aloud for a fortunate end to the long and arduous journey. She prayed simply, however archaic her words were, and there was so much warmth in her voice that Dasha's eyes were wet, and she crossed herself rather furtively, and wished Gleb would not stare at the floor boards. Olga Petrovna stopped, and Praskovia said:

'Well, laugh at me for the fool I must seem, but that was just as good as hot tea on a winter's morning.'

There came more chatter, and shuffling of feet, and kissing, and suddenly, without the least warning, the room was quiet and bare as though no friends had met and laughed and eaten within those walls, and from the ante-room Dasha heard Frossia say:

'That was brave of you, Olga. We all know what Vassia is like—'

Olga Petrovna sniffed, thrusting her feet into brown goloshes:

'Well, I am the oldest among you. I have lived with my funny old thoughts too long to change them. You may lock and bar the door in God's face, it does not matter. He is too big to mind incivility, and there is always a window left. *Milochka*, it would be easier for rye to become wheat than for a soul to escape God. I must hurry, though. It is late, and I am off to Petrosavodsk to-morrow,' she explained fussily. 'For a long time, perhaps for two years, but what does time matter if you can put work into it?' She shook a shabbily gloved finger at Dasha, 'I expect a grand exhibition when I am back. Russia—there is an idea for you—big and strong and generous, and your love could do it. . . .' And then abruptly she forgot Dasha and Gleb.

Now Olga Petrovna and Frossia were alone, standing together in some walled-off space, 'And you, *golubushka*, I could bow to the ground before you, but you would not like it. If they do send me to the Arctic, it will be good to think of you—the night lasts six months,' her mouth curved, and Dasha knew she was old and rather tired, but the next instant Olga Petrovna's eyes had youth in them as if her journey to the north and all her labours there were milestones picked out in light, 'I am proud of you,' she said to Gleb, great feeling in her voice, and went, tying a red-striped scarf at her throat.

5

The stranger came one evening when the whole world was sleet and wind, and the cold seeped into the bones, and people hurried along the pavements, jostling and pushing one another in the unfriendly wet darkness. The street lamps had no strength to struggle against the wind and the rain, and they sent out feeble oblongs of pallid yellow light.

The block of flats was noisy from within and without, and the abrupt knock startled Dasha. She stood for a second in the open doorway, aware that she had never before seen the man, else she would have recognised him. 'He is dressed too well for a student.

Imagine a coat with a karakul collar!' She tried to take in odd details of his coat and fur cap.

'Gleb Petrovich Krylov,' the voice was a rocking-chair set in an irritating slow motion, 'please—you must excuse me—I am here in passing, just for a few days, and they said he lived here,' the square plump face looked well rubbed with butter, the pale-grey eyes kept glancing past Dasha into the room, and one gloved hand stroked a carefully trimmed moustache.

'What a pale face. He looks all pale. A lump of fat, so pale, and such red lips,' thought Dasha, and said aloud: 'Yes, he does. He is out. Will you wait for him?'

She watched him take off the beautiful coat, cap, shining black goloshes, and a startling white silk scarf. She watched his plump white hands move slowly as though he had not come casually, for some half-hour or so, but meant to stay there.

'Too well soaped, scrubbed and oiled,' she thought and offered him a chair.

'Ivan Semenovich Balganov,' said the stranger, his pale eyes wandering about the room, 'perhaps you have heard—'

'No, I have never heard of you.'

'Oh, that is strange. I apologise. I am here for a few days. You are his wife?'

'Yes.'

He bowed briefly.

'I heard of him in Moscow. I have brought him a poem. It begins "The tune was the folded wing of a bird". It is a striking line, don't you think so?'

'I am no judge of poetry. So you know him?'

'My dear lady, do I know him? I have known him since 1917. We have been—excuse me—through hell together. How could I not know him? And Gleb has gone far, very far since those days. Incredible—you must forgive an old friend's candour—but there seemed so little in him when I first met him. He was very quarrelsome.'

'You have known him since 1917?'

'Precisely. Almost in another life, you might say . . . Well, everything is forgotten today,' he made a wide gesture, and Dasha felt that all his little memories were lying in the hollow of his plump white hand, 'I have also travelled a long way—but differently. I am in the Foreign Export Office,' he smiled richly, stressing the words. 'You have heard of it? They need people who, I might say, possess tact and subtlety, and know human nature, exceptionally well. Of course, there is very little leisure, but I have a leaning towards poetry. Would you like to hear my poem? They said in Moscow—' he smiled again, 'but I am boring you?'

'Not at all,' she replied quickly and truthfully, 'it is all interesting. So you knew him in 1917?'

'Yes, in those grim and tattered days,' the pale eyes stopped their wandering about the room, and rested on Dasha's face, and somehow she knew she did not resent the slightly insolent stare: Gleb seemed in the room, and Gleb would protect her, Gleb was lying on the sofa, a large saucepan of cold water by his side, and the stranger was saying 'Yes, in those days they even called me "Vanka"'. Extraordinary, isn't it?'

Yes, she felt it sharply now: Gleb was lying on the sofa, the scarred hand above the crimson counterpane. Gleb was saying: 'Vanka, put that knife away. I am not afraid of any knives. And leave Kolka alone while I sleep—you must not do anything vile,' and Gleb was also saying: 'No, those women at that school could not rescue all of us, but some went to the dogs by a different way.'

'No,' Dasha moistened her lips, 'nobody would call you Vanka now—except, perhaps, people in a nightmare.'

'*Sudarina*, madam!' his pale eyes were now fixed on her, 'Are you ill? What a very odd thing to say. I am an old friend, I come here as a visitor, I have so many claims on my time. I bring a poem to Gleb. He will be proud to see me, surely. I am a very busy man,' the plump white fingers toyed with a ring, 'you see, I might say I have made a success of things. I have a big flat in Moscow, a car, good furniture . . . I have been abroad. I like good pictures . . .' again his eyes wandered about the room, rested on the humble deal

chest, the faded crimson cover of the sofa, the darned and patched curtains, and the eyes went narrow and the lips curved as if the surroundings gave him a certain pleasure, 'Yes, I come here—with a poem, and you are saying such very odd things.'

Dasha's hand went to her throat. She wanted to say: 'You need not have painted your background, it is in your face and hands and voice, and, mostly, in your eyes . . .' But she sat silent. It was warm in the room, and she shivered. It was so cold in a vault where coffins might not be opened, and rats scuttled, and a candle burnt dim, stuck into an empty vodka bottle, its neck chipped off. She was cold, hungry, and dirty. Her lips went blue, and her small hands trembled. It was so bitterly cold and the walls were weeping with damp, and her body ached for sleep, but she dared not sleep: a knife might flash or something vile be done to someone smaller and more defenceless than herself. The vault was dark. The candle burnt palely. She dared not sleep. Yet she slept, weariness shackling her. She could not help it, she slept, and awoke just in time, barely in time. She sat up, and the knife flashed and pounced, and slashed in the wet cold dinness, but the vile thing she might not name had not been done. She breathed freely, got up, and moved to the door.

'I shall open it,' she spoke evenly, her eyes full on his pale unclean face, 'and you will go, and if you ever dare come here again, I shall know what to do. I refuse to call you Ivan Semenovitch. You were Vanka, and you *are* Vanka—'

He, too, had risen. Now she could interpret his stare: it was not insolent, but contemptuous.

'So he has told you the pretty story?'

She did not answer.

'I have opened the door,' she held it open, and watched him pick up the expensive coat, the white muffler, the fur cap, and the extravagant foreign gloves of thick pale leather. The cap in his hand, he looked at her.

'You should have listened to my poem. It is a fancy,' he curved his full red lips into an unpleasant smile, 'and you are a woman of wild fancies.'

'I am his wife,' she spoke proudly and coldly, 'but you would not understand that.'

He shrugged and shuffled past her. She slammed the door. The cold tension vanished, and her hands trembled. She flung a kerchief on her head, ran to the communal kitchen, a great jug in her arms. She fetched hot water, seized a brush, soaped it, scrubbed the chair he had sat on, and the chair his things had lain on. She scrubbed a lane on the floor between the chair and the door, and she scrubbed the large wooden knob because she remembered his hand had rested on it. When she had done, she tore the curtains apart, and flung open the window, and let the wind and the rain invade the room. 'That is good,' she breathed deeply, 'it smells cleaner already!'

The frenzied spell of energy over, Dasha knew she was tired. She picked up one of Gleb's books, but her eyes wandered all over the room, and her wrath and love together demanded more and more outlets so she must scramble into her outdoor clothes, battle with the sleet and the wind, and make her way to the college library. There she found Gleb absorbed in a manuscript.

'Dear heart, whatever has made you go out?'

'The weather is so foul. We have nothing to eat in the house. So I thought I would fetch you. The *Poor Dog*, perhaps . . . It is Wednesday—we could get *kloetzki* there. The woman does make very good *kloetzki*, you know.'

Very carefully Gleb put the manuscript back into its faded purple folder.

'Kirill is right. You are the clumsiest liar in the world. When you have finished with the weather and the *kloetzki*, you might tell me what has happened,' his hands lay on the table, and she could see the deep scar running slantwise from the little finger to the thumb, and her wrath was shredded away.

'Well, you must not mind. A reptile came. He works in the Foreign Export. He brought a poem for you to see. He was a reptile all rubbed in rancid butter. His name was Ivan Semenovitch Balganov, once known as Vanka . . .' she hurried, her eyes away from his face. 'No, no, Gleb, he told me nothing. Once I heard you talk

—in your sleep—not much, and tonight I just—well—some inner sense told me the rest . . . I have scrubbed the room clean,’ she added.

Gleb said nothing.

They were not in the library any more, she knew that. They were together, a crippled girl and a tattered dirty boy, his mind all but crippled, they were together in a place where God’s daylight was difficult to imagine because of the darkness, the stench, and the slimy horror, but they were together, and they were not in the dark. Gleb’s hand trembled on her shoulder.

‘When I was a boy, I sometimes spent an hour in the fields, my hands touching the grass. And in the evening, in some ghastly dreadful hole, I used to lift my hands to my face, and smell grass again, and all stench and horror went away . . . And life has had so many healing spells in it. But now it is not in fragments any more . . .’

‘Rodimyy, Glebushka,’ she whispered.

chapter eight

FOR SUCH THE CURTAIN ROSE NEVER TO FALL AGAIN

THE hut had been built by the forestry commission some ten years before, and Dasha wondered how anyone could have found their way to the low-lintelled door because there seemed hardly any paths in the forest. It stretched for miles, it was an enclosed world, dedicated to pine, larch, and fir, and tenanted by beast and bird so unacquainted with human voice and footfall that they knew no fear and little timidity. The first time Dasha saw a squirrel absorbed in a nut, she stopped, held her breath and waited, but, the nut eaten, the squirrel considered her quietly and would not hurry away. The forest was a kingdom, imposing its law and cus-

tom on all who came there. Beyond the vast reaches of ancient larch and pine lay another world, and the forest took but small notice of it.

In the stoutly timbered hut, apparently lost to all outside world, garrisoned by trees for watchful sentries, and safe in the immense pathlessness all about them, lived the twenty men and Dasha. From daybreak to nightfall, from twilight to dawn, the strange and urgent life continued, and it had that in common with the forest around it: no paths could be discerned either by day or by night. Sometimes, chopping wood, or preparing lint bandages, or cooking the inevitable beef and potatoes, Dasha would pause and remember where they were, and briefly realise the horror of being a thin, almost infinitesimal wedge—the enemy to the north of them and to the south of them. She might then glance about the hut where tired men slept in their bunks alongside the walls. Sometimes she counted the tousled heads and remembered that Gleb was outside on duty. Then she forced herself to bury all thought in work and more work, refused to wait for the sound of returning footsteps, closed all heart against all fear and anxiety, and worked till her bones burned with weariness, but she knew that such weariness was a great blessing.

She kept no diary, and chronology suggested a sieve held under a running tap. What were days, weeks, or months to them, beleaguered in the heart of the forest? It was winter now, she preferred to think of time in seasons, and she knew that the catastrophe had come at the height of the summer. They were at Kraspole then, and Gleb went to the nearest recruiting station, but they would not have him in the army. They said, 'We want teachers. Could you teach children? So many schools are evacuated to the east, away from the torn and smouldering western provinces. Could you do that?' they asked, and she and Gleb left Kraspole—but they were too late. The train, machine-gunned from the air, never reached Baltisky Station, and what followed Dasha could remember in thin, untidy streaks: days and nights in an unfamiliar wood, doling out their water, and eating berries and leaves, and Gleb falling into

delirium, and the men, who had joined them in the train, wandering away and never coming back.

Akim found her and Gleb. Akim was an iron will, a great grey beard, and a voice, and his years were forgotten by all once he began speaking. Dasha thought that Akim always spoke as a young and eager boy would speak, standing on a June morning on the top of a great hill, conscious of the sun and his own strength and the clean world around him. Akim found them, and carried Gleb in his arms, and led them both into the forest. Farther north they might not go, he said, and farther south the bowels of hell would have engulfed them.

Akim brought them to the hut, and nineteen bearded, white-smocked men looked at them briefly and accepted them because Akim had brought them, and they became denizens of a tiny stronghold lost in the great forest. Akim was '*starosta*', and his word was iron. He worked at a huge charcoaled map, sent out scouts, gathered information, had charge of what slender supplies of ammunition the hut housed, and the nineteen men under him were one will, one urge, one resolve. Akim spoke little enough. His enormous hairy fingers tracing a design on a map, he said briefly:

'Ten of you go out tonight,' the fingers moved over the charcoal map, the men watched them, nodded, and went, white smocks over their rough sheepskins, grey felt *valenki* up to their knees. Outside the hut they halted, putting on their skis. Dasha soon learnt to pray whenever she heard the low lilt of the song they crooned, going away from the hut. In the soft melody and the iron words were snow and human hearts and God all together, the song knit them all together, men and beasts and trees and the land, and also the skies overhead:

'We shall go where no bird can fly,
No beast prowls;
We shall go, and not turn back
Till the work be done . . .

We don't want our blood to be seen,
Our graves to be known,
We are known of the land:
She will hold us . . .'

When Gleb went, Dasha busied herself, laundering or mending men's things. She never lingered by the door, or importuned him for a last look or a kiss, and she knew that Akim approved her. 'Boy-baba,' he once muttered, 'Good lass . . .' He never said it again: he was too busy for praise. But sometimes Gleb did not go. He was the youngest, the most delicate among them all, and there were days when Akim measured him with a searching look:

'You will sleep all night, and stay in tomorrow. No face on you, lad . . . *Na tebe litza net, molodchik* . . .' And when Gleb stayed in, he worked, helped Dasha with the chores, and sometimes, seldom enough, remembered his own note-books: he had salvaged some from Kraspolc and Leningrad. But mostly he helped Dasha, and she came to fear the days when he stayed in: her own work then lost some of its strenuousness, there crept leisure for thought, and all thought spelt danger.

She kept no diary. They knew that Leningrad was besieged by Leeb's enormous army, that all communication with the city was cut off, that few people were left there, that now, in the heart of winter, Leningrad had no fuel, no light, and no transport, and scant food, but Gleb said: 'She will never fall . . . Nobody could murder her, and she will not kill herself . . .' And when Gleb said that, nineteen bearded faces looked at him with something like fatherly love. But he did not speak often. When they were in, they slept, ate, and sometimes sang—three of the men had accordions, but ordinary speech never came easily to any of them. The warmth of lovely, ordinary conversation had gone out of their life. Friends they all were in deep truth, but few spoken words moved among them. Dasha soon grew to accept the nineteen men as nineteen brothers. Feodor, the eldest, had a brightly coloured quilt over his

bunk. On cold nights he offered it to Dasha, but her stammered thanks he brushed away almost angrily.

The hut was spacious enough. The huge red brick oven occupied most of the farthest wall. One of the corners stood curtained by stained and stiff tarpaulin clumsily nailed to two poles. The men recognised their possible wish for privacy, though neither Gleb nor she now desired it: yet they appeared grateful for the curtain, acknowledging the others' rough courtesy. Privacy would have meant so much to men and women, but they were not such any more: they did not belong to each other, nor even to themselves. They were children of a mother wounded unto death and too proudly stubborn to die of her wounds.

Sometimes Gleb's hands, now rough and calloused, and often dirty, held hers in a grip that hurt, and his eyes sought hers, and she answered him by touch and look, and they lived in each other's understanding, and held such communion even when sitting by the oven, huddled close to the other men. By night the tarpaulin curtains were drawn apart. The hut lay plunged into airless inky blackness, they dared not show a hint of light, and the eight small windows were covered by shutters Akim had made. By night the hut smelt of food, wood shavings, tobacco, and human bodies and, somehow, in spite of the warmth, the life of the forest breathed in it. But Gleb spoke seldom. Words betrayed so often, both he and Dasha knew it, and the new terrible life had no room for the least betrayal.

It was winter, and Dasha was learning the great living theme of forest under snow. Snow had sound as well as colour. It sang as she trod it, and it also sang as it fell from the boughs stirred by the wind. In twilight the snow burned blue-rose, slowly turning to opal and violet. Sometimes it looked crimson at daybreak, and the men shook their heads as they considered the manuscript of the skies. Under the sun the snow shone gold with blue in it, and Dasha could imagine tiny sapphires and slender needles of gold spilt all under the trees. It glowed silver-blue in moonlight, and beneath the kindly carpet the tortured soil slept its appointed sleep.

The snow sang. The trees murmured as the wind stirred the snow-laden branches. Other sounds stole into the great orchestra, a twig falling, the voice of a small mother animal comforting her young; but there were moments when neither tree nor beast spoke at all, and all fell into deep quiet so that Dasha must cough or sing or else stamp her foot to remind herself that all sound had not died out of the world.

Outside in the forest her mind sometimes gave lodgment to thoughts. Outside, she even remembered the broken past, the studio, the room in the Fourth Line with its faded crimson sofa and the darned green-grey curtain . . . She remembered the hours at the Academy when her imagination lived a high burning life. Yet within the hut she never thought of those things. Within the hut her whole being was in a differently furnished room where potatoes must be boiled, and beef stewed, the oven stoked, and 'Akulka', a Kostroma clock of white wood, a gaily painted peasant woman on its face, must be wound every twenty-four hours. Within the hut things had to stay precise and immediate, and words, if spoken at all, must needs be simple, akin to the rough floor boards, the accordion, Feodor's quilt, and the smell of onions. And Dasha accepted that immediacy and that simplicity because the day of different things had gone for all of her generation.

It was winter. When Gleb and Dasha came to the forest, nineteen men had welcomed them. By January there were fifteen of them. Four had gone where no bird might fly, no beast prowl, but they were known of the land, and the land held them.

The winter held. The hut held them safely. The forest guarded them by day and by night, but Dasha knew that the white-smocked men defied the sanctuary offered by the forest and looked for their duty elsewhere. She knew it. She asked no questions. In the evenings, the frugal supper eaten, the men sang low country songs. Their voices had a quality of farewell in them, because they sang of fields, trees, glens, and rivers most of them would never see again. The fifteen men became one face and one voice to Dasha. She never had moods of exaltation when she heard them

sing. She sat and listened, and her heart echoed the courage of that cold impersonal farewell.

One evening Gleb came back. Some of them were singing, but Gleb, his own food eaten, whispered to Dasha:

'There is snow in my eyes all the time. Let us draw the curtain—'

He looked so weary that she thought he would fall asleep, but he whispered on:

'It is all dreadful and noisy, and other-worldly, and also splendid. Something is being kept alive, dear heart, though many have to die for it. And something is being born all the time.'

His whispering voice went on, he talked of the forest and the snow, and then suddenly went back to Leningrad, his work and hers, and Dasha's heart was crying, but she clung to him because his voice hurt her and yet was so lovely and comforting to hear in that world of strange sounds. For a few moments they were each other's, the hut grew quiet, the forest held them, and they were together.

About a week later Gleb had to go out at twilight. Dasha, her chores finished, came to the locker and fingered his note-books, and came on one she had never seen before, and read:

'I will say, not with the lips of me, nor with my mind, that at the moment of my going to her, self must lose its tissue, and find some other, and use it nobly without borrowing. I will speak of the same humble things again and again, and even now, unready and hesitant as I am, I know she will not find it a repetition . . . I must speak, I must sing, I must praise, because love is too reluctant to let go, is so beautifully stubborn, so royally unashamed of importunity, so triumphant in all seeming defeat, and love has come to my door, and made all the worlds my very own, and I know I must cease belonging to myself and cherishing the narrow stage I have built for my own use, and the house I now inhabit with my bliss and my agony. I must pull down the roof, and bring down the walls, and widen, widen my habitation. A lodgment, raised for self, would be too strait and mean for such a guest . . .'

Dasha knew, having never seen it before, that she was familiar

with it because she had lived in it since the day she knew him, and she put down the note-book almost hurriedly.

'I ought never to have looked at it,' she thought, and wished she might take it out into the forest, but it was a wild night, the snow kept whirling round about the hut, and she stayed in. Gleb and the others were not expected back till the morning. Dasha thought she would never sleep: suddenly the hunger for words was upon her, and she lay in the bunk, singing a song within her, a song of all the things she would tell him, the humble and high things. 'He must not be tired when he comes back,' she thought and fell asleep, and woke to a quiet morning and the usual circlet of her tasks.

She stood by the oven when she heard the door open, and moved, and Akim spoke sharply:

'Stay where you are, lass . . .'

'Akulka' chimed the hour. A forgotten piece of red chalk lay on the floor at her feet. She stooped to pick it up, and turned to see two men come in. They carried a stretcher covered from head to foot, but one hand was hanging outside, and she recognised the scar.

The men brought him to the curtained-off corner, and looked at her, asking pardon for the burden they carried, and Dasha answered their look, though it was hard to realise that she was not alone in the stilled hut, and she moved to the corner.

They had covered him, but she would not spare herself, and coldly she knew that madness was ringing her round and round and, because of what he had been and still was, she must ward it off. His ravaged body was a question: her tears were the only immediate answer she could give.

At last she stopped abruptly and moved away. Somewhere a door stood ajar. She must push it to get out. It was a clear, still morning. The tortured soil slept under the sunlit snow. Behind the hut stood a tank long since captured from the enemy. She looked at it. The tank was steel, and steel came from iron, and iron came from the earth, she thought. She stood listening: She heard a brief sound behind her as if made by some small distressed animal. She would

not turn, but Akim called her, and she went back. They gave her a handful of rusks, still warm from the oven, and a tin mug of hot tea. 'I should have made it for them,' she thought and drank. 'Akulka' chimed the half-hour. Dasha drained the mug. She felt warm and tired as if both her mind and body had been emptied. She raised her head and saw that the corner was curtained off.

'Akim, ah Akim—'

Clumsily he stroked her hands.

'The devil take you, lass, why can't you go on crying?'

'Akim, ah Akim,' Dasha could not cry again, and frowned at him, knowing herself unable to explain her dim and half-shaped thought. And she repeated his name again and again.

'Here is more tea, lass.'

She accepted the second mug. Her roughened hands were steady. She drank.

'He said so many things, Akim, I could not always understand him, but they were not all words. He lived what he said, Akim. You do, too . . . And once he said that these years could only be lived in wideness—not thinking of one's own little day.'

'He was a university man,' mumbled Akim, 'but he talked to us, peasants, and we were all brothers . . .'

Dasha sat still. She was not listening to Akim. The door of the hut was slightly ajar. She must close it, stoke the oven, peel the potatoes; she did not belong to herself, she had not belonged to herself for so long, nor had Gleb. She stared at the small window. Above the slender fronded branches of young firs the sky was dyed a violent red.

'It will snow again,' said Akim, 'Dasha, lass, we must try and get you to safety somewhere—'

'But I am safe here, Akim,' Dasha answered, 'I would be safe anywhere. I must close the door. It will snow again. It is late, I am sorry, Akim, I must get things ready. The men will be so hungry . . '